

ESSAYS ON THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

by
Ferenc Tókei



Akadémiai Kiadó · Budapest 1979

The original:
Az ázsiai termelési mód kérdéséhez,
Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1975.

"On the Asiatic mode of production"
and "A note on Japan"
translated by William Goth and revised by the author

"Lenin and the obshchina question",
"Lenin on Asia"
and "Contribution to the new debate on the Asiatic mode of
production" translated by Bálint Sebestyén

RECORDED - LIBRARY
HUMBOLDT STATE UNIV.

ISBN 963 05 1701 9

© Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 1979

Printed in Hungary

CONTENTS

Preface 7

On the Asiatic mode of production 9

APPENDIX

A note on Japan 87

Lenin and the obshchina question 92

Lenin on Asia 101

Contribution to the new debate
on the Asiatic mode of production 116

PREFACE

The main essay of this book was first written in the summer of 1960. It was in the course of my research into Chinese history that I had initially come upon this then rather neglected problem of Marxist philosophy of history. In elaborating the theoretical framework, it became quite clear that this lapse was by no means accidental; the Marxist concept of the Asiatic mode of production was simply irreconcilable with the vulgar, dogmatic schema of modes of production and social formations. The question of the Asiatic mode of production is the Achilles' heel of the metaphysical-dogmatic pseudo-Marxist philosophy of history.

In short, I felt immediately compelled to continue and to expand my theoretical investigations, to try to reinterpret the Marxian concept of the mode of production, the concepts of European antiquity and feudalism and, at the same time, to establish their relevancy to the problems involved in the construction of socialism. Thus the present work was followed by three more volumes: *A társadalmi formák elméletéhez* (On the Theory of Social Forms), Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1968, 1971; *Antikvitás és feudalizmus* (Antiquity and Feudalism), Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1969; *A szocializmus dialektikájához* (On the Dialectics of Socialism), Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1974. These books have been published in German under the title *Zur marxistischen Geschichtstheorie (Beiträge zu Interpretationsproblemen Marxscher Formulierungen)*: Bd. I: *Zur Theorie der Gesellschaftsformen*; Bd. II: *Antike und Feudalismus*; Bd. III: *Zur Dialektik des Sozialismus*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 1977.

A great deal has been published internationally on the subject over the past fifteen years. The most up-to-date and richest book is Lawrence Krader's *The Asiatic Mode of Production. Sources, Development and Critique in the Writings of Karl Marx*, Van Gorcum, Assen 1975. The English translation of my book was already well under way when this important book was published. The temptation was great to respond, particularly since this is an English edition, but the pressure of time proved stronger. Furthermore, several other works have been published which categorically reject the very concept of the Asiatic mode of production.

As in all such cases, successive editions of a work, especially of an initial effort, raise the question of whether to rewrite the material or leave it untouched. However, the first essay of the present volume has played a certain role in the reintroduction of the whole question and it was in the original form — with its limitations and flaws — that it became known to French, German, Italian and Japanese readers (*Sur le mode de production asiatique*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 1966; *Zur Frage der asiatischen Produktionsweise*, Luchterland, Neuwied 1969; *La forma di produzione*

asiatica, Sugar Editore [Argumenti 33], Milano 1970; *Ajia-teki seisan-yōshiki*, Mirai Sha, Tokyo 1971, 1977 [3rd ed.]). Therefore, this English edition, too, is presented without changes in content (but somewhat paraphrased stylistically on the basis of the enlarged and corrected 1975 Hungarian edition) to be a document of an earlier phase of research. The above mentioned recent developments and the host of fresh problems would require the writing of a new book. A step along this way, I would consider my edition of a collection of case studies on "Primitive society and Asiatic Mode of Production" (China, Inner Asian nomads, Arabs, and Africa South of the Sahara), which is presently being translated into English. (*Őstársadalom és ázsiai termelési mód*, Magvető Kiadó, Budapest 1976.) And perhaps it is not without interest for readers to consult the socio-historical analyses in my *Genre Theory in China in the 3rd-6th Centuries*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 1971.

F.T.

ON THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

I

The best known instance in the works of Marx where mention is made of the Asiatic mode of production is the following: "In broad outlines Asiatic, antique, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society."¹ The well-known debate which took place in the 1920s and 30s on the Asiatic mode of production focused upon a controversy concerning the proper interpretation of the above statement by Marx. One of the reasons is that it appeared to contradict Marx's own concept of the "basic" socio-economic formations. At that time some of the participants expressed the view that the Asiatic mode of production as a formation supposed to have preceded the slaveholding societies of Mediterranean Antiquity was for Marx a purely hypothetical idea which he held before becoming acquainted with Lewis H. Morgan's *Ancient Society*.² In fact, a certain change in Marx's views due to Morgan's book was mentioned first by Plekhanov in his *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908), but the latter did not mean by this that Marx in any way dismissed the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, but on the contrary, retained it.³ The debate which took place in 1931 in Leningrad ended victoriously for those who believed that the old societies of the East were essentially feudal in character. Some Soviet historians later expressed the view that Asiatic societies had been slaveholding societies, with the specific difference that they constituted arrested developments at an earlier stage of the slaveholding socio-economic formation.⁴

It has become the prevailing view among Orientalists in the Soviet Union that early Oriental societies passed initially through the slaveholding formation, then, in the middle ages, through a formation reminiscent of European feudalism. There is also the admitted difference that Asiatic societies in both stages of their development displayed many more rudiments of ancient tribal society than the European ones. Seen in this light, the category "Asiatic" merely indicated an arrested development, a retardation, but no more.⁵ True, this particular turn of the debate — if we concentrate only on its essential points — can be considered a somewhat better

¹ K. Marx: *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In: K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Works*, vol. I, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1969, p. 503.

² Cf. Lü Chen-yü: *Chung-kuo she-hui shih chu wen-t'i* (The Problems of the History of Chinese Society), Shanghai 1954, pp. 39 sqq.

³ G. V. Plekhanov: *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*, International Publishers, New York 1934, p. 50.

⁴ Lü Chen-yü: *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁵ Concerning this, cf. the critique on Wittfogel by J. A. Levada in *Sovetskoe kitaevdenie*, No. 3, 1958, pp. 190-191.

approximation of historical reality than formerly expressed views. In addition, it shows a better understanding of the thoughts of Marx and Engels on the subject.

Yet, in such interpretations we still see the lack of a truly consistent philosophy of history in the dialectical materialist sense and consequently they cannot grasp what is really specific in the Oriental type of social development. The views of the Soviet scholars properly uphold the important concept of basic social formations. However, they are only superficially able to connect it with the characteristics of Asiatic societies, as enumerated by Marx. Their use of the concept of basic formation is in irreconcilable conflict with Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production. Their views, if pursued to their logical conclusion, must necessarily lead us — even if only indirectly — to agree with those who claim that Marx and Engels had changed their views under the impact of Morgan's book.

It is essential to recognize that the above-mentioned quote from Marx, where he enumerates the Asiatic, the antique, the feudal, and the modern capitalist modes of production, stemmed from January 1859, i.e., when the concept of "basic" social formations in the currently accepted sense had not yet been fully clarified. In fact, the views of Marx and Engels did not change whatsoever on this problem while they were studying Morgan, regardless of what certain interpreters claim. There is no doubt, however, that Marx's understanding of ancient tribal society was only the intuitions of genius, until new ethnographic material and especially Morgan's discoveries had made it possible to reformulate these ideas more fully and concretely.

It is not my intention to trace the views of Marx and Engels on ancient tribal society. The concept of "basic" social formation as currently accepted was first stated by Engels in 1884 in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. By his own account it was written with Morgan's book fresh in mind as well as with the aid of notes and comments on Morgan by Marx himself. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the discoveries of Morgan and other early ethnographers were not in conflict with the earlier views of Marx and Engels, indeed, corroborated them. Marx and Engels had shown great interest in the empirical findings of the rapidly developing sciences of ethnography and anthropology. They fully recognized in them sufficient confirmation and the basis for a further, more concrete elaboration of the very ideas that they themselves had already held.

Morgan should not be regarded as the first thinker to have written on ancient society. His formidable merits notwithstanding, in *The German Ideology* (1845-46) Marx and Engels had already stated the problem in the following way: "The first form of property is tribal property [*Stammeigentum*]. It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which a people lives by hunting and fishing, by cattle-raising or, at most, by agriculture. In the latter case it presupposes a great mass of uncultivated stretches of land. The division of labour is at this stage still very elementary and is confined to a further extension of the natural division of labour imposed by the family. The social structure is, therefore, limited to an extension of the family: patriarchal chieftains, below them the members of the tribe, finally slaves. The slavery latent in the family only develops gradually with the increase of population, the growth of wants, and with the extension of external intercourse, both of war

and of barter."⁶ Admittedly, this early conceptualization left ample room for modifications, with details provided by the development of ethnography, particularly information related to societies structured by large kinship groups. Yet the quoted passage bears witness to formidable insight, in a political, economic, and historical sense; so much so that research since Lewis Morgan to the present has only been able to confirm it. From a strictly ethnographic point of view, the new findings in the field have made more precise but have not modified the classical hypotheses of Marxism. It is thus almost an understatement to say that in Marx's and Engels' early theory of social development the way had already been prepared for Morgan's concept of ancient society. In fact, Marx and Engels had already come to grips with all of the basic elements of the concept of ancient society in this first work of mature Marxism, *The German Ideology*, where they had already succeeded in sketching the salient features of the earliest human communities.

We shall have in the course of our inquiry many occasions where we shall make use of the above propositions of Marx and Engels on ancient society. We shall find ourselves in the need of an ever greater elaboration of these concepts, particularly if we wish to appreciate the organic unity between the earlier and later views of Marx and Engels on the so-called Asiatic mode of production.

In order to proceed in the proper sequence, we must point out here that Marx and Engels refer in the above-quoted passage to the first form of ownership, to tribal or communal ownership. It should be stressed that Marx and Engels were never led astray by juristic fictions in their investigations of property relations. They always considered property relations as expressions of the relations of production. They thus used the concept of property relations as a category by which it is possible to distinguish and specify the essence of what is called a socio-economic formation, since they reflect the relationship between various (subjective and objective) preconditions of production.

On the question of the distinction among the socio-economic formations two important remarks are found in *Capital*: "The essential difference between the various economic forms of society, between, for instance, a society based on slave-labour, and one based on wage-labour, lies only in the mode in which this surplus-labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourer."⁷ And the other passage: "Whatever the social form of production, labourers and means of production always remain factors of it. But in a state of separation from each other either of these factors can be such only potentially. For production to go on at all they must unite. The specific manner in which this union is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another."⁸

Only a pedant would insist that these two formulations really differ. It should be self-evident that both are expressions of the same idea, namely of the relationship of the preconditions of production, and that these are merely viewed from different angles. And since property relations are in a Marxian sense merely expressions of the mutual relationships of the preconditions of production it becomes clear that in the

⁶ K. Marx and F. Engels: *Collected Works*, vol. V, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1976, pp. 32-33.

⁷ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, International Publishers, New York 1967, p. 217.

⁸ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. II, p. 34.

former quotation from *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels intended to characterize the first substantive type of relations of production, i.e. the basis of ancient society.

References of this kind are by no means useless in view of the debates among Marxists on the interpretation of the Marxian conception of the "Asiatic" mode of production. These have given rise to an interesting point of view, which could have served as a starting point for the proper analysis of the problem, had its author pursued the idea with logical consistency. Kuo Mo-jo suggested that by the Asiatic mode of production Marx simply meant ancient tribal society when he spoke of sequences of social formation in the famous passage of 1859.⁹ Kuo Mo-jo was evidently under the impression that he had solved the "riddle" of how to interpret a certain rarely applied Marxian term, and no more. He did not make any further use in his own studies on Chinese society of the Marxian analyses of Oriental development. Yet his suggestion merits attention since it is quite appropriate to emphasize that Marx and Engels considered the absence of private property in land an outstanding characteristic of the mode of production in the Orient, that is in China, India, etc. They did so in more than a hundred references to Oriental economies and societies, which, in their view, are based upon ancient, tribal, communal property in land.

It was in 1853 that Marx first started to study the societies of the East. It was also the year when the question whether the Charter of the East India Company ought to be renewed was brought before the British Parliament for the last time. And it was in that year that Marx published a series of eight articles on India in the *New York Daily Tribune*. He wrote about the invasion of India by the products of British industry and commerce and that it had "produced the greatest, and, to speak the truth, the only *social* revolution ever heard of in Asia".¹⁰

There could be no doubt about the meaning which was intended: that property relations had always remained unchanged in Asia. Marx became intensely occupied with this feature while he was preparing his articles, so much so that he also discussed it in his correspondence with Engels. In a letter of May 1853 Engels had written on some topics in the history of religion. In his reply, Marx had this to say: "On the formation of Oriental cities one can read nothing more brilliant, graphic and striking than old François Bernier [. . .] *Travels Containing a Description of the Dominions of the Great Mogul*, etc. [. . .] Bernier rightly considered the basis of all phenomena in the East — he refers to Turkey, Persia, Hindustan — to be the *absence of private property in land*. This is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven . . ." ¹¹ In his June 6, 1853 letter Engels fully concurred with Marx. At the same time, he raised the question — for the first time as far as we know — of what had caused the Oriental stagnation: "The absence of property in land is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Herein lies its political and religious history. But how does it come about that the Orientals did not arrive at landed property, even in its feudal form? I think it is mainly due to the climate, taken in connection with the nature of the soil, especially with the great stretches of desert which extend from the Sahara straight across Arabia, Persia, India,

⁹ Lü Chen-yü: *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ K. Marx: "The British Rule in India." In: *Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 503.

¹¹ K. Marx to F. Engels, June 2, 1853. In: K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Correspondence*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1965, pp. 80-81.

and Tartary up to the highest Asiatic plateau. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of agriculture and this is a matter either for the communes, the provinces or the central government. And Oriental government never had more than three departments: finance (plunder at home), war (plunder at home and abroad), and public works (provision for reproduction)."¹²

This passage constitutes a valuable document not merely because it represents an early attempt to deal with the problem but also because an attempt was made to answer it in Marxist terms. It was decidedly correct to cite the organization of public works as a characteristically Oriental function of the state. The type of irrigation which calls for an extremely well administered cooperation of labour has been in most cases of vital necessity in Oriental agriculture.

It must be said that here Engels sounds like a protagonist of the geographic interpretation of history in that he cites climatic and soil conditions, particularly the occurrence of the great deserts, as having caused the stagnation in the East as well as the perpetuation of primitive communal land relations. In fact we seem to be faced here with a mechanistic materialist interpretation of history as in some of the works of Plekhanov. Plekhanov further developed this unfortunate formulation of Engels' with reference to the so-called "Asiatic" mode of production and — not inconsistently — he maintained that the sharp differences between East and West can be explained by the differences in geographic conditions.¹³

Marx, however, did not consider Engels' answer to be a sufficient explanation. This becomes clear if we examine Marx's reply to Engels' letter. In a letter dated June 14, 1853 he had this to say: "The stationary character of this part of Asia [i.e. India — F.T.] — despite all the aimless movement on the political surface — is fully explained by two circumstances which supplement each other: 1. the public works were the business of the central government; 2. besides this the whole empire, not counting the few larger towns, was divided into villages, each of which possessed a completely separate organisation and formed a little world in itself."¹⁴

Marx thereafter refers to a description of the structure of the contemporary Indian village community, given in a Parliamentary report. Then he continues as follows: "The Potail [chief of the village community — F.T.] is usually hereditary. In some of these communities the lands of the village are cultivated in common, in most cases each occupant tills his own field. Within them there is slavery and the caste system. The waste lands are for common pasture. Domestic weaving and spinning is done by wives and daughters. These idyllic republics, which only jealously guard the *boundaries of their village* against the neighbouring village, still exist in a fairly perfect form in the North-Western parts of India, which were recent English accessions. I do not think anyone could imagine a more solid foundation for stagnant Asiatic despotism. And however much the English may have hibernicised the country, the breaking up of those stereotyped primitive forms was the *sine qua non* for Europeanisation. Alone the taxgatherer was not the man to achieve this. The destruction of their archaic industry was necessary to deprive the villages of their self-supporting character. [...] In any case it

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹³ G. V. Plekhanov: *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ K. Marx and F. Engels: *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

seems to have been the Mohammedans who first established the principle of no property in land throughout the whole of Asia.

About the villages mentioned above I must also note that they already figure in Manu and that the basis of the whole organisation is according to him: ten villages under a superior collector, then a hundred and then a thousand."¹⁵

This answer by Marx is in accord with the assumption which underlay his articles on British rule in India, as in the one of June 10, 1853:

"Climate and territorial conditions, especially the vast tracts of desert, extending from the Sahara, through Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary, to the most elevated Asiatic highlands, constituted artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks the basis of Oriental agriculture. As in Egypt and India, inundations are used for fertilizing the soil of Mesopotamia, Persia, etc.; advantage is taken of a high level for feeding irrigative canals. This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated, in the Orient where civilisation was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralising power of government."¹⁶ From this it should be obvious that Marx held geographic factors alone to be insufficient for explaining Oriental stagnation. There is another problem in connection with Engels' assumptions in that he seems to presuppose unfavourable circumstances for agriculture in Asia. This is not only without proof but the opposite is more likely. As we shall see, a properly materialist conception of history calls for the opposite assumptions and we may well list the fact that the geographical conditions were extremely favourable to agriculture among the causes of Oriental stagnation. In Greece, on the other hand, unfavourable circumstances for agriculture prevailed, such as inferior and too narrow soil crusts, thus spurring the development of an *urban handicraft industry*.

In Marx's letter the geographic factors are given their proper place, since it should be clear that not even the first part of the above quote is identical with the geographic interpretation. If "public works were the business of the central government" it can have many other reasons aside from geographic conditions, e.g. at an early stage the very traditions of the tribe or, at a later stage, the autarchic tendency within the system of the village communities. Marx's formulation contains the geographic factor only as one of a number of other factors. It is important to stress this, since not only bourgeois historians but even many Marxist scholars are tempted to explain the stagnation of the economies and the societies of the Orient by geographic factors.¹⁷ This is not the standpoint of historical materialism but, in the better case, it leads to geographical views, as with Plekhanov, or worse, as with Wittfogel, who in his earlier works followed Plekhanov, one arrives at a narrow technological-sociological interpretation.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁶ K. Marx: "The British Rule in India". In: *Op. cit.*, p. 489.

¹⁷ Cf. R. Palme Dutt: *India Today*, People's Publishing House, Ltd., Bombay 1949, pp. 82 sqq.

¹⁸ Wittfogel arrives in this fashion at a point where all and every Eastern society becomes an example of "hydraulic" society. Cf. K. A. Wittfogel: *Oriental Despotism. A Comparative Study of Total Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1957.

In the necessity for large-scale irrigation Marx saw only one, yet by no means the most important factor of Asian development: "One of the material bases of the power of the State over the small disconnected producing organisms in India, was the regulation of the water supply. The Mahometan rulers of India understood this better than their English successors. It is enough to recall to mind the famine of 1866, which cost the lives of more than a million Hindus in the district of Orissa, in the Bengal presidency."¹⁹

In mentioning the state, Marx was evidently referring to a basic institutional agent within the superstructure, and even so only about one of these agents. This is not inconsistent with the above-quoted passage from the article on the British rule in India where he obviously stops short of defining differences between developments in East and West on the sole basis of geographic conditions, pointing out that in the Orient "civilisation was too low and the territorial extent too vast". He maintains, as in his letter, that the geographic factor is one of a number of factors in the total historical process, a factor which must be viewed within its limitations. In the following we shall attempt to corroborate our thesis that the two distinct causal chains which Marx expounds do not amount to a simple geographic explanation, but must be viewed as *historically* formed preconditions, and that both but especially the low level of civilization and its coincidence with the challenging circumstances of immense spaces provide a satisfactory explanation for all the important peculiarities of "Asiatic society".

The perpetuation of communal property in land resulted in an insufficiently developed division of labor. This is what we find stated by Marx in *Capital* as well as in many other passages of his works, as the main cause of Oriental stagnation. The most important passage ought to be quoted in its entirety: "Those small and extremely ancient Indian communities, some of which have continued down to this day, are based on possession in common of the land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on an unalterable division of labour, which serves, whenever a new community is started, as a plan and scheme ready cut and dried. Occupying areas of from 100 up to several thousand acres, each forms a compact whole producing all it requires. The chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of a commodity. Hence, production here is independent of that division of labour brought about in Indian society as a whole by means of the exchange of commodities. It is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not until it has reached the hands of the State, into whose hands from time immemorial a certain quantity of these products has found its way in the shape of rent in kind. The constitution of these communities varies in different parts of India. In those of the simplest form, the land is tilled in common, and the produce divided among the members. At the same time, spinning and weaving are carried on in each family as subsidiary industries. Side by side with the masses thus occupied with one and the same work, we find the 'chief inhabitant', who is judge, police, and tax-gatherer in one; the book-keeper, who keeps the accounts of the tillage and registers everything relating thereto; another official, who prosecutes criminals, protects strangers travelling through and escorts them to the

¹⁹ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 514 (footnote 2).

next village; the boundary man, who guards the boundaries against neighbouring communities; the water-overseer, who distributes the water from the common tanks for irrigation; the Brahmin, who conducts the religious services; the school-master, who on the sand teaches the children reading and writing; the calendar-Brahmin, or astrologer, who makes known the lucky or unlucky days for seed-time and harvest, and for every other kind of agricultural work; a smith and a carpenter, who make and repair all the agricultural implements; the potter, who makes all the pottery of the village; the barber, the washerman, who washes clothes, the silver-smith, here and there the poet, who in some communities replaces the silversmith, in others the schoolmaster. This dozen of individuals is maintained at the expense of the whole community. If the population increases, a new community is founded, on the pattern of the old one, on unoccupied land. The whole mechanism discloses a systematic division of labour; but a division like that in manufactures is impossible, since the smith and the carpenter, etc., find an unchanging market, and at the most there occur, according to the sizes of the villages, two or three of each, instead of one. The law that regulates the division of labour in the community acts with the irresistible authority of a law of Nature, at the same time that each individual artificer, the smith, the carpenter, and so on, conducts in his workshop all the operations of his handicraft in the traditional way, but independently, and without recognising any authority over him. The simplicity of the organisation for production in these self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and when accidentally destroyed, spring up again on the spot and with the same name — this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies, an unchangeableness in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic States, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty. The structure of the economic elements of society remains untouched by the storm-clouds of the political sky.”²⁰

This Marx considered to be a satisfactory explanation for Asiatic stagnation, namely:

1. the perpetuation of the ancient system of communal landownership;
2. the ambiguous social division of labor that leaves the village community completely unaltered.

We can readily observe an identical explanation offered in the formulations of June 10 and June 14, 1853, though these are given tentatively and in an unfinished form, in comparison with the massive and eloquent passage cited above from *Capital* which is so much more articulate and systematic in character.

However, Marx considered the problem to be solved in its broad outline only. He did not fail to point out the conservative effects of ground rent payments in kind upon the social order: “In Asia, on the other hand, the fact that state taxes are chiefly composed of rents payable in kind, depends on conditions of production that are reproduced with the regularity of natural phenomena. And this mode of payment tends in its turn to maintain the ancient form of production. It is one of the secrets of the conservation of the Ottoman Empire.”²¹ And elsewhere: “. . . Owing to the

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 357-358.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.

character of natural economy in general, this form [of rent] is quite adapted to furnishing the basis for stationary social conditions as we see, e.g., in Asia."²²

A yet more complex problem arises: what caused the continual existence of communal land property in Asia and the unchanged division of labour which went hand in hand with it? Our quotations from Marx, seemingly, give an explanation for the fact of "Asiatic" stagnation only after the specific "Asiatic" form of division of labour had come to existence on the basis of communal landownership, after the despotic states, their administration and rule being based on the organization of public works and on the collecting of taxes out of the surplus of the village communities, have been formed. But as to why things had developed in this way in Asia while in Europe the ancient communities dissolved relatively quickly Engels' geographic hypothesis appears to give, at least *prima facie*, a better and a more comprehensive explanation. However, the already quoted passages from Marx open much wider vistas. We will return to the question of the "main cause", but for the time being it is enough to observe that Marx's statements indicate that he did not believe that a special explanation for the stagnation in Asia, the perpetuation of village communities and the exploitative tax administrations was required. On the contrary, it appears that he considered it to be a natural development. Had it not happened in this way, then that would have called for special explanation. Above all, Marx looked upon Oriental communal ownership as a very early, spontaneous or naturally developed institution. In comparing cooperation within capitalism with cooperation within earlier societies Marx wrote: "Co-operation, such as we find it at the dawn of human development, among races who live by the chase, or, say, in the agriculture of Indian communities, is based, on the one hand, on ownership in common of the means of production, and on the other hand, on the fact, that in those cases, each individual has no more torn himself off from the navel-string of his tribe or community, than each bee has freed itself from connexion with the hive."²³

This much we have to mention in advance of our subsequent considerations, that in our opinion — and Marx seems to say the same thing — village communities and tax economies in Asia and elsewhere outside Europe have developed in the most spontaneous and natural way possible, without any specially intervening historical factors. Admittedly, some details of the process may call for special explanations but by and large it is evident that the above institutions originated in a natural fashion. It was different in Greece. There peculiar historical factors are discernible. These are of a non-general nature and even unique in history, and yet Greece constitutes the main road, the typical development of human society if viewed in historical perspective. These factors enabled the individual to free himself from the "navel-string" of his community, with the effect that a truly mature and already unambiguous civilization could begin to develop, with the eventual appearance of full private property in land. This then is the typical road which humanity has taken, one which we with hindsight and somewhat paradoxically may discern, since we are able to see now how it has further advanced mankind as a whole.

Let us examine more fully how Marx considered this breaking of the individual away from the "navel-string" of his community to be an intricate process, far

²² K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, p. 796.

²³ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 334.

from spontaneous, far from self-evident. It did call for the existence of peculiar historical circumstances. It may prove particularly instructive to quote here the passage from *Capital*, which distinguishes economic from non-economic forms of the extortion of land-rent in different societies: "It is furthermore evident that in all forms in which the direct labourer remains the 'possessor' of the means of production and labour conditions necessary for the production of his own means of subsistence, the property relationship must simultaneously appear as a direct relation of lordship and servitude, so that the direct producer is not free, a lack of freedom which may be reduced from serfdom with enforced labour to a mere tributary relationship. The direct producer, according to our assumption, is to be found here in possession of his own means of production, the necessary material labour conditions required for the realisation of his labour and the production of his means of subsistence. He conducts his agricultural activity and the rural home industries connected with it independently. This independence is not undermined by the circumstance that the small peasants may form among themselves a more or less natural production community, as they do in India, since it is here merely a question of independence from the nominal lord of the manor. Under such conditions the surplus-labour for the nominal owner of the land can only be extorted from them by other than economic pressure, whatever the form assumed may be. This differs from slave or plantation economy in that the slave works under alien conditions of production and not independently. Thus, conditions of personal dependence are requisite, a lack of personal freedom, no matter to what extent, and being tied to the soil as its accessory [*Zubehör*], bondage [*Hörigkeit*] in the true sense of the word. Should the direct producers not be confronted by a private landowner, but rather, as in Asia, under direct subordination to a state which stands over them as their landlord and simultaneously as sovereign, then rent and taxes coincide, or rather, there exists no tax which differs from this form of ground-rent. *Under such circumstances, there need exist no stronger political or economic pressure than that common to all subjection to that state.* [My emphasis — F.T.] The state is then the supreme lord. Sovereignty here consists in the ownership of land concentrated on a national scale. But, on the other hand, no private ownership of land exists, although there is both private and common possession and use of land."²⁴

A careful scrutiny of the above passage may persuade the reader that Marx had differentiated first between the slaveholding method of extracting surplus labor and the "Asiatic" and feudal counterparts, and second, that he also distinguished between the "Asiatic" and the feudal. To paraphrase Marx, in the "Asiatic" form — unlike the feudal — the peasants, having in their possession all the conditions of production, do not face a power which is anchored to owners of *private* property in land. What they face is the *state* which represents and, by taxation, economically realizes communal landownership. Consequently there is no need for any special method of "extra-economic" enforcement in the collection of ground rent aside from and beyond those methods which bind each subject to the state in his capacity as a citizen of the respective governments. This means that the serf or dependent farmer of any other type under feudalism is not subjugated to serfdom by the same type of political dom-

²⁴ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, pp. 790-791.

ination as in the "Asiatic" village communities. Under conditions where there was no private property in land as in Asia, every citizen was obligated to discharge his debt to the state in its capacity as the representative of communal ownership. This was done in a most natural way by paying homage to the position of the representative, to the embodiment of the "grand community"; which was at an earlier stage truly visible and authentic, to the despot and the host of state officials.

The Asiatic tax system thus developed in a direct way out of tributary payments to the ancient communal society in order to secure communal equipment, reserve funds and other necessities, through the millennia. Only after a considerable time had elapsed did the cultivators become aware of the fact that the world had turned against them, though by then the former institutions had been largely forgotten. They began to understand to a degree that their own communal institutions and the payments in kind to the "grand community" had become instruments of their own enslavement and exploitation. In what follows we shall deal with further aspects and consequences of this reversal in the true role of the ancient communities. The peculiarities of the "Asiatic" mode of production and its superstructure as well, appear in the final analysis to be due to this condition. We have been content to stress here that according to Marx's own words he held the rise of Asiatic despotism to be a quasi-natural process, an inevitable and spontaneous process. Further proof of this can be found in the following passage — important also in other respects: "Since the direct producer is not the owner, but only a possessor, and since all his surplus-labour *de jure* actually belongs to the landlord, some historians have expressed astonishment that it should be at all possible for those subject to enforced labour, or serfs, to acquire any independent property, or relatively speaking, wealth, under such circumstances. However, it is evident that tradition must play a dominant role in the primitive and undeveloped circumstances on which these social production relations and the corresponding mode of production are based. It is furthermore clear that here as always it is in the interest of the ruling section of society to sanction the existing order as law and to legally establish its limits given through usage and tradition. Apart from all else, this, by the way, comes about of itself as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing order and its fundamental relations assumes a regulated and orderly form in the course of time. And such regulation and order are themselves indispensable elements of any mode of production, if it is to assume social stability and independence from mere chance and arbitrariness. These are precisely the form of its social stability and therefore its relative freedom from mere arbitrariness and mere chance. Under backward conditions of the production process as well as the corresponding social relations, it achieves this form by mere repetition of their very reproduction. If this has continued on for some time, it entrenches itself as custom and tradition and is finally sanctioned as an explicit law."²⁵

To the question why the impoverishment of serfs under the conditions of feudalism is not necessary, Marx gave such an all-encompassing answer that it gives a solution to another problem too, i.e. how it was possible for the tillers of the soil in Asia, being only "tenants" of sorts, to maintain themselves for millennia and also to support magnificent tyrannical states, without utterly ruining agriculture in the pro-

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 793.

cess? (Not taking into account periods of temporary decline and wanton destruction by war, etc.) The above implies an answer to yet another question as well, which becomes essential for our own train of thought: How would the despotisms of Asia develop in a natural way? Here it is obvious from what Marx has to say about the tremendous role of tradition that it had in fact played a much greater role in Asiatic societies than in European feudalism. Social relations in Asia were relatively primitive, hence the even greater role of custom and tradition. In the beginning stages of development there is no other social force to be found which could make for social control, for order and inner cohesion. Thus it becomes easier to elevate tradition to a point where it becomes statutory law.

We do not mean to say that in Asia this or that service had become customary and hence legal purely by lapse of a certain amount of time, as frequently happened in European feudalism. From the very beginning there were present in Asia enough traditional services as were necessary for the establishment and maintenance of tax systems. Due to the increase in the number of village communities (population pressure) there was no need to augment these services which had developed from customs within ancient society. If despots and their officials nevertheless tried to augment the heavy burden of these services it suggests merely the sociological trend that all exploitation necessarily becomes even greater in intensity. Traditions and institutions of ancient society were more easily turned against the cultivators since custom and tradition were here based on the communal landownership, and the state as a whole also based its rule and existence on this very institution. True, not all the elements of ancient tradition were elevated into laws of state. The relative social egalitarianism of ancient (early tribal) society utterly fails in becoming codified law. It becomes subjected to countless limitations, if not to complete annihilation. But this does not alter the fact that a huge section of law in Asia, and in some places all laws, actually originated in the customs of ancient tribal society.

Such are the grounds on which we are inclined to believe that the foregoing quotation from Marx offers a satisfactory explanation as to why and how the Asiatic mode of production has developed in a natural way, from the decline of ancient society in Asia.²⁶ (An identical or similar process has evidently been going on in Africa and pre-Columbian America.)

Thus far we have made ample use of quotations from Marx himself. We shall continue to do so, since it is precisely one of our express purposes in these pages to demonstrate that Marx's views on the Asiatic mode of production were not based on superficial hunches or occasional and unrelated attempts at formulations. These views were on the contrary well formulated and digested. They found their organic place within the Marxian political economy and theory of history.

These passages from Marx's works ought to convince even sceptics that his views on the Asiatic mode of production constitute an indispensable part of his life work. Without this concept it is difficult to imagine how *Capital* could have been written at all, particularly if we bear in mind Marx's scholarly care, which, it is well known, did not rest until all important loose ends were pursued to the end. The

²⁶ Relying on such considerations of Marx, I have used in other writings on ancient Chinese society the term "patriarchal" (i. e. "tradition based") bureaucratism or despotism.

concept of the Asiatic mode of production is an organic part of the theory of *Capital*. Had Marx felt any great theoretical or factual uncertainty about the social formations which preceded capitalism — not least about the “Asiatic” formation — he would, in all probability, have abstained from putting even volume one of *Capital*, the political economy of capitalism, into definitive form.

Though Marx was ready to compare the characteristics of the capitalist mode of production with the earlier modes taken together as a whole, he never failed to clarify and stress the distinguishing marks of each of these pre-capitalist formations.

Thus we observe that Marx held the “Asiatic” mode of production to be strictly different from ancient slaveholding society of Mediterranean antiquity or from feudalism, to be a substantial mode of production. This becomes clear even from his summaries or brief overviews, as from the passages already cited. Elsewhere in *Capital* we read: “In the ancient Asiatic and other ancient modes of production, we find that the conversion of products into commodities, and therefore the conversion of men into producers of commodities, holds a subordinate place, which, however, increases in importance as the primitive communities approach nearer and nearer to their dissolution.”²⁷

This sentence, with its comparison of capitalist and pre-capitalist relations in form of a coordinating enumeration, indicates, no doubt, that the “Asiatic” and the “antique” modes of production are understood by Marx to be quite distinct and separate ones. The distinction is evident also from the following: “In all the forms in which slave economy (not the patriarchal kind, but that of later Grecian and Roman times) serves as a means of amassing wealth, where money therefore is a means of appropriating the labour of others through the purchase of slaves, land, etc., money can be expanded as capital, i.e., bear interest, for the very reason that it can be so invested.”²⁸ Such conceptualizations by Marx make it clear that he wished to designate as “slave economy” only the economy of European Antiquity (and its later partial reappearances) based as it was on private property in land as well as in slaves. He vividly distinguished from this the Oriental slavery which he designated as “patriarchal” because its base rested upon tribal communal property in land.²⁹

In a word, Marx always takes care to distinguish the Asiatic, the European antique, and the feudal societies and their respective peculiar characteristics. Compare in addition: “Under slavery, feudalism and vassalage (so far as primitive communities are concerned) it is the slave-owner, the feudal lord, the tribute-collecting state, who are the owners, hence sellers, of the products.”³⁰ And: “. . . Under those earlier modes of production the principal owners of the surplus-product with whom the

²⁷ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 79.

²⁸ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, p. 594.

²⁹ On the patriarchal forms of slavery in China's Chou period, cf. the author's paper “Die Formen der chinesischen patriarchalischen Sklaverei in der Chou-Zeit”. In: *Opuscula Ethnologica Memoriae Ludovici Biró Sacra*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 1959, pp. 291–318.

³⁰ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, p. 326.

merchant dealt were namely, the slave-owner, the feudal lord, and the state (for instance, the oriental despot . . .)."³¹

Can there be any doubt in the light of these quotations that the concept of the Asiatic mode of production is by no means a fleeting idea of Marx, as some have implied? On the contrary, according to him it is a clear and distinct social formation as an organic part of his theory of socio-economic formations. The passages just quoted all occur, moreover, as if by chance, in volume three of *Capital* which came out only posthumously. Marx worked on it probably until his death. Presumably, he had *not* dropped the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, and had *not* changed his views about it after becoming familiar with the ethnographic work of Lewis Morgan.

The passages quoted lead to a question, however, which is more difficult to answer: What were Marx's views about the social stratification and the class composition within the Asiatic mode of production? This question of the class composition of Oriental societies caused, as we shall see, considerable trouble during the debates of the nineteen twenties and thirties. The question has remained open to this day and continues to foster misunderstandings. We seek in vain in Marx's own writings for a definition or a full account. Marx did not have time to deal in detail and at full length with questions of class structure. To be sure, even the treatment of capitalist class structure had remained a torso. The fifty-second chapter of *Capital* volume three was devoted to this task, but unfortunately only a few introductory passages were completed. None of this implies that Marx held views which were so hazy that he did not deem them worthy of publication. He did have his views about class structure, in capitalism as well as in the "Asiatic" mode of production. Marx expressed many views on the topic in various contexts. It is obvious that in principle he considered the problem solved.

Marx held, as we understand it, that on the basis of his ascertainments on "Asiatic" economy and property relations it would prove possible to analyse class relations within the "Asiatic" mode of production just as in terms of the capitalist economy it was relatively easy to analyse class relations within capitalism. In order to see this more clearly let us begin with the seemingly contradictory and therefore confusing statement that although Marx considered the ancient form of tribal ownership to be likewise the foundation of the "Asiatic" mode of production, it did not occur to him to name the "Asiatic" formation simply a society of "ancient" communities. (Here we shall refrain from entering into a debate on the interesting question as to what extent the concept of "ancient communal society" had already ripened in Marx and Engels before they read the work of Morgan.)

We must once more quote from Marx, now from *The German Ideology* where paragraphs are found relating to the first form of ownership — tribal ownership: "It corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production, at which a people lives by hunting and fishing, by cattle-raising or, *at most, by agriculture. In the latter case it presupposes a great mass of uncultivated stretches of land.* The division of labour is at this stage still very elementary and is confined to a further extension of the natural division of labour imposed by the family. The social structure is, therefore, limited to an extension of the family: patriarchal chieftains, below them the members of

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 331.

the tribe, finally slaves. The slavery latent in the family only develops gradually with the increase of population, the growth of wants, and with the extension of external intercourse, both of war and of barter."³²

This text is also clear: Marx and Engels seem to have realized full well that tribal communal ownership is above all the form of ownership which is found in gathering-hunting or in pastoral societies. It is precisely for this reason that they considered it necessary to say "at most" before the inclusion of agriculture. They immediately hastened to show, however, that even within the framework of agriculture (advanced and dominant agriculture) tribal ownership may well continue to subsist. (The argumentation here is evidently akin to the one which occurred to Marx in 1853 in his explanation of the causes of Oriental stagnation.)

These propositions about the division of labour and social stratification clearly show that for Marx and Engels the necessary and inevitable historical process was the one in the cause of which — on the basis of tribal ownership — the division of labour and the stratification within the family widen out until they encompass the whole society (without, however, becoming a true social division of labour and a true class stratification). It is moreover evident that the Marxist classics restated their explanation in cases where tribal communal ownership continued within the later stage of agricultural production. In the latter cases, i.e. under circumstances of "Asiatic" mode of production, the social stratification as an expansion of the family structure is called *caste system* in the works of Marx and Engels. Once more we find is stated in *The German Ideology* that "... the crude form of the division of labour which is to be found among the Indians and Egyptians calls forth the caste-system in their state and religion. . .".³³ Or in *Capital*: "Plato's Republic, in so far as division of labour is treated in it, as the formative principle of the State, is merely the Athenian idealisation of the Egyptian system of castes."³⁴

It can be further questioned — and in some instances it should be questioned — whether the castes of various Asiatic societies coincide with real social classes, and if so, to what degree. Marx, doubtlessly, considered the caste system in Asia to be a form of the class relation of exploiter/exploited and not a total lack of classes. In some cases, to be sure, castes may develop in a way—similarly to European medieval estates—failing to reflect the real class differences and tensions, but rather serving to hide them from view. But in general the caste system appears in the Marxian perspective not as an immanent institution of ancient communal (tribal) society but as the characteristics of incipient class society. This early and incipient class relationship is, in this view, much less developed than the slave-owner-slave relationship of European antique society, the first class society in history. Still, the caste system becomes even more cruel and dangerous, from the perspective of social development, despite, or more correctly, on account of having retained many traits of the tribal solidarity and obligations of ancient society, and resting on the basis of ancient communal ownership. It is only in this context that the full implication of the words "at most" becomes clear in the above-quoted passage. It

³² K. Marx and F. Engels: *Collected Works*, vol. V, p. 33. (Author's emphasis.)

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

³⁴ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 366.

has an underlying meaning: it indicates tragic contradictions and impediments wherever ancient communal ownership relations continue within otherwise advanced agricultural societies. Is it not fully obvious that "with all peoples who have passed a certain primitive stage, in the course of the development of agriculture this common ownership becomes a fetter on production"?³⁵

In 1853 Marx characterized this particular impediment to growth as follows: "... We must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself the helpless prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan. We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances, instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalising worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of *Hanuman*, the monkey, and *Sabbala*, the cow."³⁶

The special meaning of the expression "at most" is evident in this context; it leads to social stagnation, further progress is not assured by putting an end to patriarchal communal ownership, once that stage of agriculture is reached. To put it in another way: private property in land and slaves must be instituted.

Engels wrote the following on the historical significance of slavery: "The ancient communes, where they continued to exist, have for thousands of years formed the basis of the most barbarous form of state, oriental despotism, from India to Russia. It was only where these communities dissolved that the peoples made progress of themselves, and their first economic advance consisted in the increase and development of production by means of slave labour."³⁷

These lines with their mention of Russia have caused misunderstandings in some quarters, though in fact they refer only to the form of the state. The other point worthy of emphasis is that Engels did not classify the societies of the East as slaveholding societies. Quite the contrary, he stressed that they had become arrested at a previous stage of development.

What kind of class differentiation did Marx and Engels discover in the caste systems of the East? Above all, how in their view did the ruling strata — the classes

³⁵ F. Engels: *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (from here on *Anti-Dühring*), International Publishers, New York 1966, p. 151.

³⁶ K. Marx: "The British Rule in India". In: *Op. cit.*, pp. 402-403.

³⁷ F. Engels: *Op. cit.*, p. 200.

and castes — originate in the first place? In what follows we shall attempt to answer this question. Marx stated quite clearly in the quoted passage from his article on India in 1853, that the Indian village communities "were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery". The classics of Marxism had never any doubt that the germs of castes and classes were already discernible within ancient tribal society and that these germs became reinforced in the course of social development. Engels in particular had much to say about stratification in ancient society: "In the oldest primitive communities equality of rights existed at most for members of the community; women, slaves and strangers were excluded from this equality as a matter of course."³⁸

However, it is the business of anthropology to deal with this or that concrete manifestation of stratification within tribal society, both within the communities and amongst those of unequal size. Here we are interested only in one special aspect of stratification within ancient society, namely in the stratum which enjoys privileges because they stem from the performance of real functions on behalf of the community. Indeed, such privileges are initially justified. A stratum of this sort is implied in Marx's description of village communities in India, there being a number of personages who are "maintained at the expense of the whole community" since they *do* perform public functions of a beneficial nature. We find, however, in the Asiatic mode of production not merely these basic units, i.e. village communities, but their whole chain, that give rise to a pyramidlike structure of taxation. All governmental authority is based within this mode of production upon patriarchal, communal property in land. It is for this reason that we must look for the origin of ruling castes or groups initially within the system of original public services and functions which the privileged strata were always expected to perform. Marx said about the origin of priesthood in ancient Egypt that "the necessity for predicting the rise and fall of the Nile created Egyptian astronomy, and with it the dominion of the priests, as directors of agriculture".³⁹ At first it appears as an argument against this view that force and conquest played a considerable role in the origin and change of the ruling groups in the Orient. It cannot be doubted (and has also been expressed in the quoted passages) that this is acknowledged in the Marxist classics.

Conquest inevitably played a great role in the replacement of governments and dynasties because the foundation of Oriental society, the village communities and their network, were always unable to exert effective resistance to armed force. Indeed, it can be stated that this basic social network remained largely indifferent to the storms within the "cloud regions" of politics. It remained of no great concern to the simple villager *who* laid heavy taxes upon him. What was truly important to him was that the conquerors should not further increase the burdens and services, and that they should continue to perform at least as many public services as their predecessors.

The latter circumstance is an indication that services and not sheer force alone were at the bottom of Oriental despotism. Marx and Engels emphasized this seeming paradox. It is evidently a sign that the performance of public functions served to ensure despotic power, because Asia's village communities tolerated this supremacy,

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

³⁹ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 514 (footnote 1).

notwithstanding the hardships from innumerable conquests and changes of dynasties. Not conquest by itself but the performance of public functions lent authority to the despots of the East and stabilized their rule.

Polemizing with Dühring's Proudhonist views, Engels stated: "Even the formation of a primitive aristocracy, as in the case of the Celts, the Germans and the Indian Punjab, took place on the basis of common ownership of the land, and at first was not based in any way on force, but on voluntary goodwill and custom."⁴⁰ And further on, against Dühring's theory of coercion, Engels finds formulations which seem to constitute a general theory of the origin of classes and state power: "In each such community there were from the beginning certain common interests the safeguarding of which had to be handed over to individuals, even though under the control of the community as a whole: such were the adjudication of disputes; repression of encroachments by individuals on the rights of others; control of water supplies, especially in hot countries; and finally, when conditions were still absolutely primitive, religious functions. Such offices are found in primitive communities of every period — in the oldest German Mark-communities and even today in India. They are naturally endowed with a certain measure of authority and are the beginnings of state power. The productive forces gradually increase; the increasing density of the population creates at one point a community of interests, at another, conflicting interests, between the separate communes, whose grouping into larger units brings about in turn a new division of labour, the setting up of organs to safeguard common interests and to guard against conflicting interests. These organs which, for the reason that they represent the common interests of the whole group, have a special position in relation to each individual community — in certain circumstances even one of opposition — soon make themselves even more independent, partly through heredity of functions, which comes about almost as a matter of course in a world where everything happens in a natural way, and partly because they become more and more indispensable owing to the increasing number of conflicts with the other groups. It is not necessary for us to examine here how this independence of social functions in relation to society increased with time until it developed into domination over society; how what was originally the servant developed gradually, where conditions were favourable, into the lord; how this lord, on the basis of different conditions, emerged as an Oriental despot or satrap, the dynast of a Greek tribe, chieftain of a Celtic clan, and so on; and to what extent was force used in this transformation; and how finally the separate individual rulers united into a ruling class. Here we are only concerned with establishing the fact that the exercise of a social function was everywhere the basis of political supremacy; and further that political supremacy has existed for any length of time only when it fulfilled its social functions. However great the number of despotic governments which rose and fell in India and Persia, each was fully aware that its first duty was the general maintenance of irrigation throughout the valleys, without which no agriculture was possible. It was reserved for the enlightened English to lose sight of this in India; they let the irrigation canals and sluices fall into decay, and are now at last discovering, through the regularly recurrent famines, that they have neglected the one activity

⁴⁰ F. Engels: *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

which might have made their rule in India at least as legitimate as that of their predecessors.”⁴¹

It should be emphasized that these views of Engels completely coincided with those of Marx. Admittedly, the complexity in the development of Oriental despotism and class relations may yet call for further research from various approaches. Though the explicitly expressed view of Marx and Engels on this topic give us hints and guideposts only, yet for our present purposes it is enough to recognize that Marx and Engels did consider the “Asiatic” mode of production to be a type of class society, even though they maintained that tribal communal ownership subsists within its framework. Historically, the beginning of this may have occurred when the surplus product of the self-sufficient agricultural communities was taken from them in the very name of the community. Marx writes on this point: “Assuming some form of social production to exist (e.g., primitive Indian communities, or the more ingeniously developed communism of the Peruvians), a distinction can always be made between that portion of labour whose product is directly consumed individually by the producers and their families and — aside from the part which is productively consumed — that portion of labour which is invariably surplus-labour, whose product serves constantly to satisfy the general social needs, no matter how this surplus-product may be divided, and no matter who may function as representative of these social needs.”⁴²

In the Asiatic mode of production it is the state originating from the performance of public functions that lays claim to this surplus product — referring precisely to the interests of the state-size community as a whole and standing on the basis of (tribal) communal ownership. It is helpful to recall the words of Marx where he makes the distinctions between the Asiatic, the antique, and the feudal societies, based on the query who expropriates the surplus product. In Marx’s own words: “. . . it is the slave-owner . . . the tribute-collecting state, who are the owners, hence sellers, of the products.”⁴³ And later he says that “. . . under those earlier modes of production the principal owners of the surplus-product with whom the merchant dealt, namely, the slave-owner, the feudal lord, and the state (for instance, the oriental despot). . .”.⁴⁴

Consequently, when the state acts in the name of the community, i.e. of the owner of the land, it in fact behaves as the owner of the means of production and even as that of the producers themselves, and thus establishes explicit exploitation on the basis of the tribal communal ownership. This could be the reason why in a case Marx listed the “Etruscan theocrat” as a monopolist, owner of the means of production, in a number of examples which include the noble of Athens, the *Civis romanus*, the Norman baron and others, though, to Etruscan society, he evidently applied the concept of the “Asiatic” mode of production based on tribal communal ownership.⁴⁵

The appropriation of the surplus product with references to titles of land is the same as the appropriation of ground rent — whether the land is owned privately or

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 198–199.

⁴² K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, pp. 877–878.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 326.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 331.

⁴⁵ Cf. K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 235.

held in common. In the Asiatic mode of production it is thus the state which collects taxes and thereby appropriates ground rent extorted from the producers.

For the benefit of those to whom, on the basis of this, it should occur to draw the inference that since in Asia, as regards the realization of landed property, the despot and his tax officials behaved as the owners of the land they are to be characterized after all as slaveholding or feudal landowners, let us quote Marx's warning which calls attention to the fact that to behave as a landowner from the viewpoint of the realization of landed property is a common trait of all forms of ground-rent and does not contain any distinctive criterion. Marx was quite explicit: "There are three main errors to be avoided in studying ground-rent, and which obscure its analysis.

1. Confusing the various forms of rent pertaining to different stages of development of the social production process. — Whatever the specific form of rent may be, all types have this in common: the appropriation of rent is that economic form in which landed property is realised, and ground-rent, in turn, presupposes the existence of landed property, the ownership of certain portions of our planet by certain individuals. The owner may be an individual representing the community, as in Asia, Egypt, etc.; or this landed property may be merely incidental to the ownership of the immediate producers themselves by some individual as under slavery or serfdom; or it may be a purely private ownership of Nature by non-producers, a mere title to land; or, finally, it may be a relationship to the land which, as in the case of colonists and small peasants owning land, seems to be directly included — in the isolated and not socially developed labour — in the appropriation and production of the products of particular plots of land by the direct producers. — This *common element* in the various forms of rent, namely that of being the economic realisation of landed property, of legal fiction by grace of which certain individuals have an exclusive right to certain parts of our planet—makes it possible for the differences to escape detection."⁴⁶

This passage from Marx may clearly serve as an admonition against confusing various social formations with each other. Be that as it may, we are here primarily concerned with demonstrating that Marx held the Asiatic mode of production to be a class stratified, exploitative society. Such a task might appear at first sight unnecessary, since few would characterize the despotic states of the old Orient as ancient communal societies. From a theoretical standpoint, however, demonstrating that such an opinion is erroneous is of some importance, since otherwise we would hardly be in a position to counter the dogmatic misunderstanding that, from the Marxian perspective, communal property in land only serves as the foundation of ancient tribal society. On the other hand this is the only way we can explain that real paradox of Oriental societies which is exclusively eligible to throw light on their characteristics: the paradox of class relations emerging on the basis of ancient communalism.

Engels in his famous book of 1884 on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* does not deal with the question of the Asiatic mode of production. This is one of the reasons, it appears, for the widespread view according to which Marx and Engels changed their ideas about Asiatic societies under the impact of Lewis

⁴⁶ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, pp. 633–634.

Morgan's *Ancient Society*. The other well-known "pillar" of this school of thought consists in the fact that Engels, in enumerating the basic social formations, does not refer to the "Asiatic mode of production", but — it is argued — replaces it with the concept of ancient communal society. Let us observe that it is not at all difficult to cite passages from Engels' book to prove that he in no way intended to change his previously held views about the Asiatic mode of production.

Engels certainly accepted the grand evolutionary scheme of Morgan — "savagery-barbarism-civilization" — and integrated it into Marxist theory. Nevertheless, he did not include the Asiatic societies into the category of "civilization" because of the *absence of private property in land*. And this is the salient point. This is why he considered Asiatic society to be a stage of barbarism, and not civilization. He discussed the development of "civilization" only in the cases of Greek, Roman, and Germanic peoples. Not a word here about the possibility that privately held landed property may have arisen in antiquity anywhere outside the Graeco-Roman world. One of his late conceptualizations reads as follows: "The gens was the foundation of the social order of the most, if not all, the barbarian peoples of the world, and in Greece and Rome we pass directly from it into civilisation."⁴⁷ It can hardly be contested that Engels considered only Greece and Rome in the era of antiquity to be "civilized" societies. To be sure, Engels thought quite possible a type of social development that would not lead directly to a (classical Graeco-Roman type) civilization. He wrote, e.g. about the origin of class relations in Greece: "The class antagonism on which the social and political institutions rested *was no longer that between the nobles and the common people*, but that between slaves and freemen, dependents and citizens."⁴⁸ Engels evidently did not state that the antagonism between slaves and slaveholders became *always and everywhere* the first stage as the first and original class stratification at the breakdown of ancient society. Even in the historically typical case of Greece he recognized a transitory period when primary *class antagonism* is to be found between the nobility (meaning the aristocracy which held public office) and the commoners (meaning the direct producers of goods). The same idea can be found in his summary of the origin of the Roman state: "In Rome gentile society became an exclusive aristocracy amidst a numerous plebs, standing outside of it, having no right but only duties. The victory of the plebs burst the old gentile constitution asunder and erected on its ruins the state, in which both the gentile aristocracy and the plebs were soon wholly absorbed."⁴⁹

It is even more important to understand that Engels in this work wished above all to depict the general and typical, the highway of social development. He was most concerned with the main stages of development, and not so much with questions of Oriental stagnation. It is for this reason the more remarkable that Engels was able to provide valuable observations about the different non-typical processes of development which strongly *differed from the typical* trend of humanity, such as those in Asia and elsewhere. Yet even in this respect there reappears the troublesome question of whether Engels' popular account of basic social formations does or does

⁴⁷ K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Works*, vol. III, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1970, p. 218.

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 284. (Author's emphasis.)

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 326.

not contradict his (and Marx's) earlier formulations concerning this subject. We believe there are modifications to be found, but no logical contradiction with earlier views. In the very early version Marx spoke of three pre-capitalist forms of ownership: the tribal, the antique, and the feudal, and societies based on these forms of ownership were considered by him, without exception, to be various types of *class society*.

In the middle of the nineteenth century questions concerning the invasion of Western capital into the spaces of Asia moved into the foreground of international politics. This practical relevance of the problem of "Asiatic" societies may have influenced Marx when he regarded the "Asiatic" societies based on communal tribal ownership to constitute the first basic social formation. We must bear in mind that Marx had at his disposal many more data about "Asiatic" societies, especially India, than about primitive tribal societies. Since data on the communal forms in Asia were more readily available, Marx may have considered that Asian societies provided better material to illustrate his thesis about social development. Some years later Engels was in a position to deal with ancient society and communal property relations with examples of actually existing tribal communities. In line with this, Engels in 1884 also distinguished three basic forms of property before capitalism. The difference is that Engels had in the meantime accumulated ethnographic material which enabled him to concretize ancient communalism, after the earlier and more abstract versions. He was in the position to describe with more concrete data the original, basic form of early communal ownership — the ancient tribal community — without using the words "at most".

It should be noted that Engels perceived in the pre-Columbian non-complex agriculture of American Indians a type of production similar to that of stagnant societies in Asia. And this stage in the Americas had been preceded by a long period of early agriculture depending on one single type of cereals and in some parts of the South on one kind of stock as well, quite unlike as in Asia where most of the important Old World types of stock and cereals were domesticated and bred. In this case of comparison Engels clearly indicates his awareness that typical stages of development were possible within "barbarism", which amounts to saying that these kinds of progress ultimately ended in stagnation. In his view the cause of these divergent ways was to be sought in the pressure of the factors of historical and ecological conditions.

Engels considered the typical way of development of human society to lie in the road to settlement through the manifold Eurasian development of stock breeding and nomadism. For this was the way of transition that historically could lead to the development of private property in flocks and slaves and ultimately to the antique form of private landownership. Here Engels adhered to Marx in general. The latter had written that "... a *general* relationship can be proved, since history began among all Oriental tribes, between the settlement of one part of the tribes and the continued nomadic life of the others".⁵⁰ Let us take a closer look. What is the special relationship between nomadic and settled peoples, which Marx considered so important in history?

⁵⁰ K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Correspondence*, p. 80.

Marx spoke, for instance, about the origin of commodity exchange and the use of money: "Objects in themselves are external to man, and consequently alienable by him. In order that this alienation may be reciprocal, it is only necessary for men, by a tacit understanding, to treat each other as private owners of those alienable objects, and by implication as independent individuals. But such a state of reciprocal independence has no existence in a primitive society based on property in common, whether such a society takes the form of a patriarchal family, an ancient Indian community, or a Peruvian Inca State. The exchange of commodities, therefore, first begins on the boundaries of such communities, at their points of contact with other similar communities, or with members of the latter . . . Nomad races are the first to develop the money-form, because all their worldly goods consist of moveable objects and are therefore directly alienable; and because their mode of life, by continually bringing them into contact with foreign communities, solicits the exchange of products."⁵¹ Engels also frequently wrote on this matter. For instance, he pointed out that exchange relations among communities in the typical and hence non-"Asiatic" case led to commodity production. Commodity production reacts in turn upon the communities with disruptive effects.⁵² Engels was thus entirely in the spirit of Marx when in his later work of 1884 he stressed the necessity of a stage of animal husbandry within the scale of general social development. But the decisive step toward civilization — toward the birth of private ownership of land in Greece — appears in this book nevertheless as a result of natural, internal processes. To this picture only some, and rather general, comments on foreign trade are added: "As far back as written history goes we find the land already divided up and transformed into private property, which corresponds with the relative developed state of commodity production and a commensurate commodity trade towards the end of the higher stage of barbarism."⁵³ "The nobility lived mainly in and around Athens, where maritime commerce, with occasional piracy still as a sideline, enriched it and concentrated monetary wealth in its hands. From this point the developing money system penetrated like a corroding acid into the traditional life of the rural communities founded on natural economy."⁵⁴ "The Athenians were soon to learn, however, how quickly after individual exchange is established and products are converted into commodities, the product manifests its rule over the producer. With the production of commodities came the tilling of the soil by individual cultivators for their own account, soon followed by individual ownership of the land."⁵⁵ These and similar observations, however, hardly suffice in explaining the origin of Greek private property in land, since usury, commerce, and big cities also made their appearance in Asia and did not lead to the disruption of the village communities or to private property in land, held by nobles who administered it in the alleged name of the "community". Here Engels has drawn, perhaps, a somewhat too simple picture of the way the "navel-string" was cut in old Greece. "The titles of individuals to parcels of land originally assigned to them by the gens or tribe were now so well established

⁵¹ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 87-88.

⁵² Cf. F. Engels: *Anti-Dühring*, pp. 179-180.

⁵³ K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Works*, vol. III, p. 276.

⁵⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 277.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 279.

that these parcels became their hereditary property. The thing they had been striving for most just before that time was liberation from the claim of the gentile community to their parcels of land, a claim which had become a fetter for them. They were freed from this fetter . . ."⁵⁶

In China, however, both solidified — the hereditary right of the parcel holder tillers as well as the right of the mandarins. Yet neither ever succeeded in establishing private property in land. The tillers of the land did not wish to, since the village community did offer public services, and some measure of protection; the mandarins, in general, did not wish to either, because their very existence depended upon the ground rent which they appropriated as the representatives of the communal rights in land.

In a similar way Engels did not consider it necessary to give a special explanation as to why and how *Germanic* property in land had developed. (As we noted above he did invoke special conditions rather for the sake of explaining the situation in Asia and pre-Columbian America.⁵⁷)

However, Engels never became so simplistic in his argument as to suggest that the emergence of private property in land — the stage corresponding to classical civilization — was a necessary and inevitable development everywhere, due to internal factors alone. Yet, some of Engels' remarks, like the one quoted, may give rise to doubt and suggest a wrong interpretation. But misinterpretation can only arise in spite of, and contrary to, the true intentions of Engels. In his book he searches for a general outline of social evolution, *the typical development of mankind*, and not merely for any particular people. The fault, if any, lies in the fact that he understood the total process of development of civilization as a natural process not requiring special explanation. Thus, the institutional developments in Greece, Rome, and among the Germanic peoples, all with private property, remain as little explained as the indestructibility of tribal communal landownership in Asia.

Marx, and Engels too, when speaking of the primordial forms of capital, tried to explain that the accumulation of sums of money can only lead under special circumstances to an enhancement of social development. Marx wrote on usury capital: "Usury has a revolutionary effect in all pre-capitalist modes of production only in so far as it destroys and dissolves those forms of property on whose solid foundation and continual reproduction in the same form the political organisation is based. Under Asian forms, usury can continue a long time, without producing anything more than economic decay and political corruption. Only where and when the other prerequisites of capitalist production are present does usury become one of the means assisting in establishment of the new mode of production by ruining the feudal lord and small-scale producer, on the one hand, and centralising the conditions of labour into capital, on the other."⁵⁸ About the way commercial capital, if independently

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 324.

⁵⁷ As is to be expected we are able to find in Engels' book many references about preconditions for the development of Germanic private ownership, for instance, that "between the Roman *colonus* and the new halfserf peasant we find the free Frankish peasant". (Page 141 and cf. page 155.) Still, there is lacking in the book any decisive passage to the extent that Germanic landed property may never have developed at all in the absence of the influence of landed private property in Graeco-Roman antiquity.

⁵⁸ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, p. 597.

developed, is of influence, he stated that it "is inversely proportional to the degree of development of society".⁵⁹ About the way trade can influence a mode of production in whose bosom it develops he had this to say: "The development of commerce and merchant's capital gives rise everywhere to the tendency towards production of exchange-values, increases its volume, multiplies it, makes it cosmopolitan, and develops money into world-money. Commerce, therefore, has a more or less dissolving influence everywhere on the producing organisation, which it finds at hand and whose different forms are mainly carried on with a view to use-value. To what extent it brings about a dissolution of the old mode of production depends on its solidity and internal structure. And whither this process of dissolution will lead, in other words, what new mode of production will replace the old, does not depend on commerce, but on the character of the old mode of production itself. In the ancient world the effect of commerce and the development of merchant's capital always resulted in a slave economy; depending on the point of departure, only in the transformation of a patriarchal slave system devoted to the production of immediate means of subsistence into one devoted to the production of surplus-value. However, in the modern world, it results in the capitalist mode of production. It follows therefrom that these results spring in themselves from circumstances other than the development of merchant's capital."⁶⁰

There emerges in these considerations, at times admittedly repetitious, an important and provocative idea. It appears that Marx held the patriarchal or communal property system (with slaveholding) to be a precondition for the arrival of the system of antique private property (using slave labour proper), precisely as he held feudalism to be a precondition for the arrival of modern capitalism.

Let us turn now back to some remarks of Marx on the significance of commerce: "The obstacles presented by the internal solidity and organisation of pre-capitalistic, national modes of production to the corrosive influence of commerce are strikingly illustrated in the intercourse of the English with India and China. The broad basis of the mode of production here is formed by the unity of small-scale agriculture and home industry, to which in India we should add the form of village communities built upon the common ownership of land, which, incidentally, was the original form in China as well. In India the English lost no time in exercising their direct political and economic power, as rulers and landlords, to disrupt these small economic communities. English commerce exerted a revolutionary influence on these communities and tore them apart only in so far as the low prices of its goods served to destroy the spinning and weaving industries, which were an ancient integrating element of this unity of industrial and agricultural production. And even so this work of dissolution proceeds very gradually. And still more slowly in China, where it is not reinforced by direct political power. The substantial economy and saving in time afforded by the association of agriculture with manufacture put up a stubborn resistance to the products of the big industries, whose prices include the *faux frais* of the circulation process which pervades them. Unlike the English, Russian commerce, on the other hand, leaves the economic groundwork of Asiatic production

⁵⁹ Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 328.

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 331-332.

untouched."⁶¹ From this it is evident that Marx did not believe that commerce alone could be of decisive importance in the genesis of private property in land. To put it slightly differently: he acknowledged its influence only within the context of other, supporting conditions. While Marx spoke of the importance of the trading nations of antiquity in history, similarly as he had spoken of the role of nomadism, he guarded against overestimating this factor. (Engels followed him here with his formula of the "first" and the "third" great division of labour.) Marx wrote, for instance: "The trading nations of ancient times existed like the gods of Epicurus in the intermediate worlds of the universe, or rather like the Jews in the pores of Polish society. The trade of the first independent flourishing merchant towns and trading nations rested as a pure carrying trade upon the barbarism of the producing nations, between whom they acted the middleman."⁶² Indeed, a purely commercial explanation of the rise of individual landownership in Greece, where private property in land emerged for the first time in human history, is insufficient. At first it is necessary to understand the mode of production which was broken up by the new form of ownership.

Engels had called the society out of which in Greece "civilisation has sprung directly" a military democracy, a "heroic epoch", based on husbandry and adventurous raids for booty. He appropriately and adequately presented the problems, both from the viewpoint of the general and the specific of socio-economic factors in the development of Greece. He then proceeded to analyze in an overall fashion the question of the origin of Germanic landed property. We must, however, come to the conclusion that Engels did not fully dispose of the problems, since he failed to give an analysis of the difference between the "heroic epoch" of Greece and that of Germanic developments. Therefore, he left essentially unexplained the origin of land ownership, in Greece as well as among the Germanic peoples.

We do not claim to have solved these problems left over by Engels. What we wish to do here is merely to draw attention to the peculiarities of Greek development, which cannot be really understood without the mediation of special historical factors. The Asian situation of old does not call for any special causative explanation. In the case of Greece, however, it would be necessary to study the foundation of ancient Athens, especially as it was the focal point of interaction between various Asiatic and ancient tribal societies. Greece was also able to compete with various commercial nations, while curiously it retained the mobility of a quasi-nomadic society. Athens undeniably was not bound to traditional ways of agricultural societies. (We must add that Greece could not cling to them even if it had wanted to in the absence of "great amounts of uncultivated land".)

It would be necessary to investigate more clearly the many fortunate circumstances and their constellation to be found in old Greece in order to fully understand what happened there, and why precisely the inhabitants of Greece were first able to pass through the "normal childhood of humanity". Taken separately as *particular* events, these circumstances may appear to bear a purely contingent character. Yet it is their simultaneous occurrence and coincidence which has produced the

⁶¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 333-334.

⁶² *Op. cit.*, p. 330.

special conditions of development which ultimately enabled first Greece and then all of humanity to proceed along the path of *general* progress.

It has become obvious in the light of what has been said that the central problem consists in explaining the origin of private ownership in Greece. All European private property in land appears from then on under *its direct or indirect influence*. (No doubt, it had its most direct effects upon Roman development.) Needless to say, we must not fail to consider the internal forces, but these can be fully understood only within the matrix of international preconditions. Otherwise we may get the false impression that the decline and fall of ancient tribal society must always and everywhere lead to private property in land. It is not really as easy to cut the "navel-string" of the ancient community. Nor was it easy for the Germanic peoples. We may recall what a fundamental role was played in the slow growth of "Germanic" feudalism by the existence of private land ownership of Roman slaveholding society, in the form of small peasant holdings and even of the remains of huge latifundia. Only if we appreciate the effects of these remnants of antique society is it possible to understand the development of small landed property within Germanic village communities on the one hand and of feudal large estates on the other. Where no smallholding developed, it did not occur to the caretakers of communal property (chieftains and officials) to transform their "titular ownership" into real private property, at least not until special circumstances forced them to do so. Let us look, for instance, at what happened in the Scottish Highlands, as Marx saw it: "The Highland Celts were organised in clans, each of which was the owner of the land on which it was settled. The representative of the clan, its chief or 'great man', was only the titular owner of this property, just as the Queen of England is the titular owner of all the national soil. When the English government succeeded in suppressing the intestine wars of these 'great men', and their constant incursions into the Lowland plains, the chiefs of the clans by no means gave up their time-honoured trade as robbers; they only changed its form. On their own authority they transformed their nominal right into a right of private property, and as this brought them into collision with their clansmen, resolved to drive them out by open force."⁶³

There cannot be any doubt as to what prompted the "titular owners" in the above cases to transform their convenient and quite sufficient patriarchal ways of exploitation into ways based on a very new institution — private ownership. On the one side it was the British government which stood in the way of further adventurous exploits; on the other side they themselves felt the urge to compete with the British gentry. The gentry had already begun to apply "capitalist" methods. The success of original accumulation in Britain was witnessed by the Scottish nobles. It is these special circumstances which led to the transformation of "titular" into real private property in land.

We have listed here some of the ideas and conclusions about the Asiatic mode of production in the works of Marx and Engels that were already at the disposal of the discussants in the 1920s and 30s. We are basing ourselves on the classical sources in claiming that the Asiatic mode of production was always an organic part of historical materialism, in spite of the fact that Engels failed to mention it among his basic

⁶³ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 728.

social formations. Both Marx and Engels considered the Asiatic mode of production an arrested development which retained many features of ancient tribal society, first of all the type of property relations on which it was based.

One reason, though not necessarily the main reason, for the occurrence of so many futile and violent debates on the question of the Asiatic mode of production may have been the unsystematic and widely scattered character of the observations in the classics of Marxism. Frequently they were given in the form of mere hints. The times of publication were often decades apart. Another reason for delay and confusion may have been that Engels did not discuss the Asiatic mode of production in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* which in some of its formulations gave the false impression that he had abandoned the concept.

II

The question whether or not the Asiatic mode of production, as defined in our first chapter, constituted a well conceived and integral part in the historical materialism of classical Marxism can be easily answered. Should our quotations, perhaps due to their widely scattered and unsystematic character, have left any doubts in the reader's mind we may now resolve them with the aid of Marx's original conception of *Capital*: the *Grundrisse* of 1857-58. The work contains a special section on pre-capitalist formations of ownership and production. This section dealing with social relations prior to capitalism and aiming, first of all, at the clarification of its origin actually represents a unit by itself. The text appeared in print only in 1939.¹ This section, although not intended for publication by Marx, was part of the initial design of *Capital*. It was unknown in the 1920s and thus did not play any role in the debates. Since then this important work of Marx has been cited very frequently, primarily in order to characterize the Asiatic variants of "slave society" or of "feudalism", in line with the compromise solution of 1931. Few have drawn attention to the fact that Marx had here, as elsewhere, sharply distinguished the Asiatic mode of production from the antique and feudal formations of ownership and society. The wide ranging debate of 1931 in Leningrad stopped short of a full discussion and its inadequacy can hardly be questioned. True, the unfinished state of the *Grundrisse* and its difficult style hampered the further pursuit of these problems, to say nothing of the period of the personality cult from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties in the socialist countries. Whatever the reasons for the long silence, it is inexcusable today.

The *Grundrisse* carefully distinguishes between the three pre-capitalist formations of society — the "Asiatic", the "Antique", and the "Germanic", notwithstanding

¹ K. Marx: *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie* (Rohentwurf), Moscow 1939, in the original German. Pages 375-413 contain the section on "Pre-capitalist Economic Formations". This section was republished in Russian in 1939 in the journals *Proletarskaia Revoliuciia* and *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii*. Subsequently it was issued under separate cover by Gospolitizdat in Moscow in 1940. Further translations into other languages of the "Formen der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehn", as Marx had named the chapter, were forthcoming. An English edition is Karl Marx: *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, translated by Jack Cohen, edited and with an introduction by E. J. Hobsbawm. International Publishers, New York 1965. Our quotations are from this book.

their many common features. The book proceeds with particular reference to a comparative study of the development of capitalist private ownership. Should anyone still believe that the *Grundrisse* constituted for Marx only occasional and experimental ideas we would like to emphasize that all of the ideas found in this manuscript which we shall analyze in detail can be found also in other writings of Marx, from the *German Ideology* to *Capital* and although they are scattered over a wide area, all were applied by him with perfect consistency.

The pertinent section of the *Grundrisse* begins with the observation that for the existence of capitalist relations "another prerequisite is the separation of free labour from the objective conditions of its realisation—from the means and material of labour. This means above all that the worker must be separated from the land, which functions as his natural laboratory. This means the dissolution both of free petty landownership and of communal landed property, based on the oriental commune. — In both these forms the relationship of the worker to the objective conditions of his labour is one of ownership: this is the natural unity of labour with its material prerequisites. Hence the worker has an objective existence independent of his labour. The individual is related to himself as a proprietor, as master of the conditions of his reality. The same relation holds between one individual and the rest. Where this prerequisite derives from the community, the others are his co-owners, who are so many incarnations of the common property. Where it derives from the individual families which jointly constitute the community, they are independent owners coexisting with him, independent private proprietors. The common property which formerly absorbed everything and embraced them all, then subsists as a special *ager publicus* [common land] separate from the numerous private owners."²

Let us here simply state in reference to communal property in land in Asia that Marx's remark concerning the toiler-cultivator as the proprietor of land apparently contradicts his other statements on this issue, in which he characterized the despot representing the state in all Asian societies as the monopolist of lands, even though nominally basing himself upon the earlier form of communal ownership of the means of production.³

Yet we shall presently see how this seeming contradiction can easily be resolved in Marx's own words.

Marx then proceeds to distinguish three forms of property in land before the appearance of modern capitalism. He does so in full agreement with earlier conceptualizations, but perhaps more articulately than in *The German Ideology*. The characterization of the first form of property in land in history reads as follows: "The first prerequisite of this earliest form of landed property appears as a human community, such as emerges from spontaneous evolution [*naturwüchsig*]: the family, the family expanded into a tribe, or the tribe created by the inter-marriage of families or combination of tribes. We may take it for granted that pastoralism, or more generally a migratory life, is the first form of maintaining existence, the tribe not settling in a fixed place but using up what it finds locally and then passing on. Men are not settled by nature (unless perhaps in such fertile environments that they could subsist on a

² *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

³ Cf. K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, pp. 331 and 634.

single tree like the monkeys; otherwise they would roam, like the wild animals). Hence the tribal community, the natural common body, appears not as the consequence, but as the precondition of the joint (temporary) appropriation and use of the soil. — Once men finally settle down, the way in which to a smaller degree this original community is modified, will depend on various external, climatic, geographical, physical, etc., conditions as well as on their special natural make-up — their tribal character. The spontaneously evolved tribal community, or, if you will, the herd — the common ties of blood, language, custom, etc. — is the first precondition of the appropriation of the objective conditions of life, and of the activity which reproduces and gives material expression to, or objectifies [*vergegenständlichenden*] it (activity as herdsmen, hunters, agriculturalists, etc.). The earth is the great laboratory, the arsenal which provides both the means and the materials of labour, and also the location, the *basis* of the community. Men's relation to it is naive: they regard themselves as its *communal proprietors*, and as those of the community which produces and reproduces itself by living labour. Only in so far as the individual is a member — in the literal and figurative sense — of such a community, does he regard himself as an owner or possessor. In reality *appropriation* by means of the process of labour takes place under these *preconditions*, which are not the *product* of labour but appear as its natural or *divine* preconditions.”⁴

It appears that the first form of property in land is communal. Its essence must be sought in *membership* in a community, a gens, or a tribe, which constitutes a precondition for both the (communal) proprietorship and (actual) possession of the individual. We are easily able to recognize this first form of ownership among pastoral nomads. If and when they become sedentary the modification of collective property depends on many special and (taken separately) contingent factors. Let us now take a look at the modification of communal landed property under Asiatic conditions:

“Where the fundamental relationship is the same, this form can realise itself in a variety of ways. For instance, as is the case in most Asiatic fundamental forms it is quite compatible with the fact that the *all-embracing unity* which stands above all these small common bodies may appear as the higher or sole *proprietor*, the real communities only as *hereditary* possessors. Since the *unity* is the real owner, and the real precondition of common ownership, it is perfectly possible for it to appear as something separate and superior to the numerous real, particular communities. The individual is then in fact propertyless, or property — i.e. the relationship of the individual to the *natural* conditions of labour and reproduction, the inorganic nature which he finds and makes his own, the objective body of his subjectivity — appears to be mediated by means of a grant [*Ablassen*] from the total unity to the individual through the intermediary of the particular community. The despot here appears as the father of all the numerous lesser communities, thus realising the common unity of all. It therefore follows that the surplus product (which, incidentally, is legally determined in terms of [*infolge*] the real appropriation through labour) belongs to this highest unity. Oriental despotism therefore appears to lead to a legal absence of property. In fact, however, its foundation is tribal or common property, in most

⁴ K. Marx: *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, pp. 68–69.

cases created through a combination of manufacture and agriculture within the small community which thus becomes entirely self-sustaining and contains within itself all conditions of production and surplus production. — Part of its surplus labour belongs to the higher community, which ultimately appears as a *person*. This surplus labour is rendered both as tribute and as common labour for the glory of the unity, in part that of the despot, in part that of the imagined tribal entity of the god. In so far as this type of common property is actually realised in labour, it can appear in two ways. The small communities may vegetate independently side by side, and within each the individual labours independently with his family on the land allotted to him. (There will also be a certain amount of labour for the common store — for insurance as it were — on the one hand; and on the other for defraying the costs of the community as such, i.e. for war, religious worship, etc. The dominion of lords, in its most primitive sense, arises only at this point, e.g. in the Slavonic and Rumanian communities. Here lies the transition to serfdom, etc.) Secondly, the unity can involve a common organisation of labour itself, which in turn can constitute a veritable system, as in Mexico, and especially Peru, among the ancient Celts, and some tribes of India. Furthermore, the communality within the tribal body may tend to appear either as a representation of its unity through the head of the tribal kinship group, or as a relationship between the heads of families. Hence either a more despotic or a more democratic form of the community. The communal conditions for real appropriation through labour, such as irrigation systems (very important among the Asian peoples), means of communication, etc., will then appear as the work of the higher unity — the despotic government which is poised above the lesser communities. Cities in the proper sense arise by the side of these villages only where the location is particularly favourable to external trade, or where the head of the state and his satraps exchange their revenue (the surplus product) against labour, which they expend as labour-funds.”⁵

In the above passage Marx gives an extraordinarily condensed picture, yet all the essentials are included. We can see at once that the widely scattered remarks in *Capital* do constitute a well organized and interrelated system of explanation. Our earlier quotes have served to show that Marx in *Capital* and to his death never changed his mind on any point covered in the *Grundrisse*.

On the contrary, we may say that all his occasional remarks were based on the analysis elaborated in the *Grundrisse*. In the passages quoted above, Marx comes to grips with the difficult question of the modification of communal ownership of land and the appearance of exploitation founded on communal ownership after the stage of agriculture has been reached. This is the way he resolves the seeming contradiction according to which the tillers of the land are called the “proprietors” of land, whereas it is the despot who, by monopolizing this precondition of the peasant’s labor, appropriates its surplus product.

Of course, we shall have to return to the difficult question of whether the Asiatic despot and his officials ought to be called an exploitative “class”. It must be emphasized that it was none other than Marx himself who provided the clue to the problematic question of “class relations” in Asiatic society. Thus, for example, he had

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 69–71.

already stated in the passage quoted above that the reasons why the alienation of a surplus product has to turn into exploitation are as follows:

1. we are faced with the *abstract* tribal unit,
2. we have a *real* village community.

This is equivalent to saying that the tribal aristocracy turns into a ruling class the moment the tribal communities it represents begin to break down.

The profound content of the *Grundrisse* will become fully apparent when we come to the special varieties of property relations. Marx was well able to differentiate a variety of relations in the later stages of communal ownership, such as the democratic and despotic forms, family-centered forms, and public-centered forms in the cultivation of land and so on. Notwithstanding all such varieties, Marx held the essence of the problem to be whether membership in the existing community was decisive or not for existing ownership relations. If the answer was yes, he assumed the particular form of ownership to be a special offshoot of tribal ownership. He returned to this point many times, searching for ever more compact formulations: "... the member of the community as such is not, as in the specifically oriental form, co-owner of the communal property. Where property exists only as communal property, the individual member as such is only the possessor of a particular part of it, hereditary or not, for any fraction of property belongs to no member for himself, but only as the direct part of the community, consequently as someone in direct unity with the community and not as distinct from it. The individual is therefore only a possessor. What exists is only *communal* property and *private possession*. Historic and local, etc., circumstances may modify the character of this possession in its relation to the communal property in very different ways, depending on whether labour is performed in isolation by the private possessor or is in turn determined by the community, or by the unity standing above the particular community."⁶

Let us now turn to the second or antique form of ownership which Marx characterized as follows: "The second form [of property] has, like the first, given rise to substantial variations, local, historical, etc. It is the product of a more dynamic [*bewegten*] historical life, of the fate and modification of the original tribes. The *community* is here also the first precondition, but unlike our first case, it is not here the substance of which the individuals are mere accidents [*Akzidenzen*] or of which they form mere spontaneously natural parts. The basis here is not the land, but the city as already created seat (centre) of the rural population (landowners). The cultivated area appears as the territory of the city; not, as in the other case, the village as a mere appendage to the land. However great the obstacles the land may put in the way of those who till it and really appropriate it, it is not difficult to establish a relationship with it as the inorganic nature of the living individual, as his workshop, his means of labour, the object of his labour and the means of subsistence of the subject. The difficulties encountered by the organised community can arise only from other communities which have either already occupied the land or disturb the community in its occupation of it. War is therefore the great all-embracing task, the great communal labour, and it is required either for the occupation of the objec-

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

tive conditions for living existence or for the protection and perpetuation of such occupation. The community, consisting of kinship groups, is therefore in the first instance organised on military lines, as a warlike, military force, and this is one of the conditions of its existence as a proprietor. Concentration of settlement in the city is the foundation of this warlike organisation. The nature of tribal structure leads to the differentiation of kinship groups into higher and lower, and this social differentiation is developed further by the mixing of conquering and conquered tribes, etc. Common land — as state property, *ager publicus* — is here separate from private property. The property of the individual, unlike our first case, is here not direct communal property, where the individual is not an owner in separation from the community, but rather its occupier. Circumstances arise in which individual property does not require communal labour for its valorisation (e.g. as it does in the irrigation systems of the Orient); the purely primitive character of the tribe may be broken by the movement of history or migration; the tribe may remove from its original place of settlement and occupy *foreign* soil, thus entering substantially new conditions of labour and developing the energies of the individual further. The more such factors operate — and the more the communal character of the tribe therefore appears, and must appear, rather as a negative unity as against the outside world — the more do conditions arise which allow the individual to become a *private proprietor* of land — of a particular plot — whose special cultivation belongs to him and his family. — The community — as a state — is, on the one hand, the relationship of these free and equal private proprietors to each other, their combination against the outside world — and at the same time their safeguard. The community is based on the fact that its members consist of working owners of land, small peasant cultivators; but in the same measure the independence of the latter consists in their mutual relation as members of the community, in the safeguarding of the *ager publicus* [common land] for common needs and common glory, etc. To be a member of the community remains the precondition for the appropriation of land, but in his capacity as member of the community the individual is a private proprietor. His relation to his private property is both a relation to the land and to his existence as a member of the community, and his maintenance as a member is the maintenance of the community, and vice versa, etc. Since the community, though it is here not merely a *de facto product of history*, but one of which men are conscious as such, has therefore *had an origin*, we have here the precondition for *property* in land — i.e. for the relation of the working subject to the natural conditions of his labour as belonging to him. But this ‘belonging’ is mediated through his existence as a member of the state, through the existence of the state — hence through a *precondition* which is regarded as divine, etc. — ... The individual is placed in such condition of gaining his life as to make not the acquiring of wealth his object, but self-sustenance, its own reproduction as a member of the community; the reproduction of himself as a proprietor of the parcel of ground and, in that quality, as a member of the commune. The continuation of the commune is the reproduction of all its members as self-sustaining peasants, whose surplus time belongs precisely to the commune, the labour of war, etc. Ownership of one’s labour is mediated through the ownership of the conditions of labour — the plot of land, which is itself guaranteed by the existence of the community, which in turn is safeguarded by the surplus labour of

its members in the form of military service, etc. The member of the community reproduces himself not through cooperation in wealth-producing labour, but in co-operation in labour for the (real or imaginary) communal interests aimed at sustaining the union against external and internal stress [*nach aussen und innen*]. Property formally belongs to the Roman citizen, the private owner of land is such only by virtue of being Roman, but any Roman is also a private landowner."⁷

In this lengthy and rather complex characterization of the antique form of landed private property by Marx himself, the essential point seems to be that he held it to be "the product of a more dynamic historical life, of the fate and modification of the original tribes". He professed to return in this context to the preconditions for the "cutting of the navel-string of [the] community". He mentions many external and internal influences, none by themselves of decisive significance, but taken together truly amounting to great force.

We should mention it explicitly that Marx had spoken in the above passage of a *beginning* phase in the development of antiquity, even regarding Rome; he spoke in effect of what was held to have been the "golden age" of antiquity. Thus we read in a footnote in volume one of *Capital*: "Peasant agriculture on a small scale, and the carrying on of independent handicrafts, which together form the basis of the feudal mode of production, and after the dissolution of that system, continue side by side with the capitalist mode, also form the economic foundation of the classical communities at their best, after the primitive form of ownership of land in common had disappeared, and before slavery had seized on production in earnest."⁸ And in the third volume: "This form of free self-managing peasant proprietorship of land parcels as the prevailing, normal form constitutes, on the one hand, the economic foundation of society during the best periods of classical antiquity, and on the other hand, it is found among modern nations as one of the forms arising from the dissolution of feudal land ownership."⁹ In the previous lengthy excerpt Marx defines the antique form of small peasant private property. This has, as we shall see, two different meanings: on the one hand, it depicts the original form of antique private ownership and the beginning of its historical developments; and on the other hand it encompasses the origin of its inner dialectics. Needless to say, this duality represents only two different sides of the same question or two moments of one and the same development.

Aside from the above characterization of antique private ownership, we also find in Marx's *Grundrisse* the following more dynamically orientated passages: "Part of it remains with the community as such, as distinct from the members, *ager publicus* [common land] in its various forms; the remainder is distributed, each plot of land being Roman by virtue of the fact that it is the private property, the domain, of a Roman, the share of the laboratory which is his; conversely he is Roman only, in so far as he possesses this sovereign right over part of the Roman soil."¹⁰ Thereafter follow abstracts from Niebuhr's *Roman History*: "The right of use of common land by possession originally belonged to the Patricians who later granted it to their clients;

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 71-74.

⁸ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 334 (note 3).

⁹ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. III, p. 806.

¹⁰ K. Marx: *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 75.

the assignment of property out of the *ager publicus* belonged exclusively to the Plebeians; all assignments in favour of Plebeians and compensation for a share in the common land. Landed property in the strict sense, if we except the area surrounding the city wall, was originally in the hands only of the Plebeians (rural communities subsequently absorbed)."¹¹ Or again, in Marx's own words: "Since the Patrician represents the community to a higher degree, he is the possessor of the *ager publicus*, and uses it through the intermediary of his clients, etc. (also, gradually appropriates it). — ... [it is] the city [as] the centre of rural life, the domicile of the land workers, as also the centre of warfare — which gives the community as such an external existence, distinct from that of its individual members."¹²

These formulations already suffice for opening a more detailed discussion of the antique society and mode of production. However, it is first necessary for us to fully clarify the meaning of the three distinct modes of production which Marx outlined in the *Grundrisse*. For this reason, let us look now at the "Germanic" mode of production. Marx's definition of it starts with the observation that the village ruled over the town: "Ancient classical history is the history of cities, but cities based on land-ownership and agriculture; Asian history is a kind of undifferentiated unity of town and country (the large city, properly speaking, must be regarded merely as a princely camp, superimposed on the real economic structure); the Middle Ages (Germanic period) starts with the countryside as the locus of history, whose further development then proceeds through the opposition of town and country; modern (history) is the urbanisation of the countryside, not, as among the ancients, the ruralisation of the city. — Union in the city gives the community as such an economic existence; the mere presence of the town as such is different from a mere multiplicity of separate houses. Here the whole does not consist of its separate parts. It is a form of independent organism. Among the Germans, where single heads of families settle in the forests, separated by long distances, even on an external view the community exists merely by virtue of every act of its members, although their unity existing in itself is embodied [*gesetzt*] in descent, language, common past and history, etc. The community therefore appears as an association, not as a union, as an agreement [*Eini-gung*], whose independent subjects are the landowners, and not as a unity. In fact, therefore, the community has no existence as a state, a political entity as among the ancients, because it has no existence as a city. If the community is to enter upon real existence, the free landowners must hold an assembly, whereas, e.g. in Rome it exists apart from such assemblies, in the presence of the city itself and the officials placed at its head, etc. — True, the *ager publicus*, the common land or peoples' land, occurs among the Germans also, as distinct from the property of individuals. It consists of hunting grounds, common pastures or woodlands, etc., as that part of the land which cannot be partitioned if it is to serve as a means of production in this specific form. However, unlike the Roman case, the *ager publicus* does not appear as the particular economic being of the state, by the side of the private owners — who are properly speaking private proprietors as such in so far as they have been excluded from or deprived of the use of the *ager publicus*, like the Plebeians. The *ager publicus* appears rather as a mere supplement to individual property among the Germans, and

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 75–76.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

figures as property only in so far as it is defended against hostile tribes as the common property of one tribe. The property of the individual does not appear mediated through the community, but the existence of the community and of communal property as mediated through — i.e. as a mutual relation of — the independent subjects. — At bottom every individual household contains an entire economy, forming as it does an independent centre of production (manufacture merely the domestic subsidiary labour of the women, etc.). In classical antiquity the city with its attached territory formed the economic whole, in the Germanic world, the individual home, which itself appears merely as a point in the land belonging to it; there is no concentration of a multiplicity of proprietors, but the family as an independent unit.”¹³

We are witnessing here, evidently, a progressive improvement as well as a simplification of formulations of the three pre-capitalist forms of ownership, as discussed in the *Grundrisse*. It enables Marx in effect to draw the following comparison of the three socio-economic formations: “In the Asiatic form (or at least predominantly so) there is no property, but only individual possession; the community is properly speaking the real proprietor, — hence property only as *communal property* in land. In antiquity (Romans as the classic example, the thing in its purest and most clearly marked form), there is a contradictory form of state landed property and private landed property, so that the latter is mediated through the former, or the former exists only in this double form. The private landed proprietor is therefore simultaneously an urban citizen. Economically citizenship may be expressed more simply as a form in which the agriculturalist lives in a city. In the Germanic form, the agriculturalist is not a citizen, i.e. not an inhabitant of cities, but its foundation is the isolated, independent family settlement, guaranteed by means of its association with other such settlements by men of the same tribe, and their occasional assembly for purposes of war, religion, the settlement of legal disputes, etc., which establishes their mutual surety. Individual landed property does not here appear as a contradictory form of communal landed property, nor as mediated by the community, but the other way round. The community exists only in the mutual relation of the individual landowners as such. Communal property as such appears only as a communal accessory to the individual kin settlements and land appropriations. The community is neither the substance, of which the individual appears merely as the accident, nor is it the general which *exists and has being* as such in men’s minds, and in the reality of the city and its urban requirements, distinct from the separate economic being of its members. It is rather on the one hand, the common element in language, blood, etc., which is the premise of the individual proprietor; but on the other hand it has real being only in its *actual assembly* for communal purposes; and, in so far as it has a separate economic existence, in the communally used hunting-grounds, pastures, etc., it is used thus by every individual proprietor as such, and not in his capacity as the representative of the state (as in Rome). It is genuinely the common property of the individual owners, and not of the union of owners, possessing an existence of its own in the city, distinct from that of the individual members.”¹⁴

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 77–79.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 79–80.

These formulations of Marx do not merely give us the *clue* to the proper understanding of the three types of property relations but they also describe the general development of property in land throughout the history of humanity. Each of the three forms of ownership start with their respective ancient communities; the peoples of Asia, the Greeks, Romans, and the Germanic tribes all become part of history only at the disruption of ancient society, that is, in the "heroic" period of tribal development: "An isolated individual could no more possess property in land than he could speak. At most he could live off it as a source of supply, like the animals. The relation to the soil as property always arises through the peaceful or violent occupation of the land by the tribe or the community in some more or less primitive or already historically developed form."¹⁵

Different historical conditions led at various times and places to three different forms of ownership: the Asiatic, the antique, and the Germanic. All three had their start in communal tribal ownership. The peoples of Asia preserved it in an essentially unchanged form and even contributed to its stabilization. Thus in Asia communal property became institutionalized. On the other hand, the Greeks and Romans developed from this tribal communal property relations the antique mode of production and the Germanic peoples the feudal form. In spite of their seeming isolation from each other, these three forms represent nevertheless three consecutive links in the chain of human history. The ancient tribal community remains the precondition of all three forms of ownership, but in differing degrees. Regardless of whether these three forms are viewed together or in a sequence they can be regarded as differing stages of the emancipation of the individual from the "natural" community, as consecutive steps in severing the individual from the "navel-string" of the community. In Asia, as well as in precolonial Africa and pre-Columbian America, this was never achieved. In European antiquity it was achieved, but only at the cost of tearing the fabric of ancient society asunder. In European feudalism, however, it became the very foundation of society.

Marx offered us still another synopsis of these forms of development of ownership: "The property mediated by its existence in a community may appear as *communal property*, which gives the individual only possession and no private property in the soil; or else it may appear in the dual form of state and private property which coexist side by side, but in such a way as to make the former the precondition of the latter, so that only the citizen is and must be a private proprietor, while on the other hand his property *qua* citizen also has a separate existence. Lastly, communal property may appear merely as a supplement to private property, which in this case forms the basis; in this case the community has no existence except in the *assembly* of its members and in their association for common purposes. — These different forms of relationship of communal tribal members to the tribal land — to the earth upon which it has settled — depend partly on the natural character [*Naturanlagen*] of the tribe, partly on the economic conditions in which the tribe really exercises its ownership of the land, i.e. appropriates its fruits by means of labour. And this in turn will depend on the climate, the physical properties of the soil, the physically conditioned mode of its utilisation, the relationships to hostile or neighbouring tribes, and such

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 81.

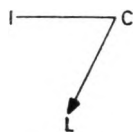
modifications as are introduced by migrations, historical events, etc. If the community as such is to continue in the old way, the reproduction of its members under the objective conditions already assumed as given, is necessary. Production itself, the advance of population (which also falls under the head of production), in time necessarily eliminates these conditions, destroying instead of reproducing them, etc., and as this occurs the community decays and dies, together with the property relations on which it was based. — The Asiatic form necessarily survives longest and most stubbornly. This is due to the fundamental principle on which it is based, that is, that the individual does not become independent of the community; that the circle of production is self-sustaining, unity of agriculture and craft manufacture, etc.”¹⁶

Which of the three potential forms of property actually develops thus depends upon an array of internal and external factors and their particular confluence. Only the Asiatic form (“at most”) depended for its existence upon an abundance of acreage for cultivation, and this was not a major issue in ancient society. If and when there is at the disposal of a people an abundance of uncultivated land — a natural condition in ancient Asia — then it follows, from the nature of tribal ownership itself and membership in the tribe, that production does not disrupt the relations of production but actually tends to preserve them. However, a confluence of special circumstances is necessary for the severing of the “navel-string” of the community and the rise of private property in land. The scarcity of fertile land is certainly not a negligible factor in this process.

It is likewise clear from Marx’s investigations that feudal property could not arise directly from tribal collective property. The former is wholly independent of membership in the community as a precondition of its coming into being. In order for such a high degree of independence to be possible it was absolutely necessary that the stage of antique private property in land be known and followed. (In European history this happened when the Germanic tribes conquered antique society which was based on the private ownership of land.) Does it not become evident then that the antique form of ownership was in the beginning the sole example of private property in land — that it was the only possible and necessary form, and could never be skipped? Is it not evident that it served as a bridge also for feudal landed property? All this becomes even clearer if we formulate Marx’s concepts not merely in an abstract fashion but also visually by way of graphs.

Here we condense the essence of the three forms of property into a graphic symbol of relations between the individual, the community, and the land, because “owning” and “possessing” in all three forms depended upon the mediation of the community. These illustrate the three pre-capitalist forms of ownership, their essence and relationships:

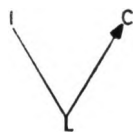
TRIBAL (ASIATIC)



ANTIQUE



GERMANIC



¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.

In order to arrive at this graphic presentation it is only necessary to concentrate on the essentials, and to free ourselves from the mere historical fact that all three forms stemmed from relations within the tribal community. (This is by no means contingent if seen from another angle. In schemata serving a different purpose this would have to be taken into consideration.)

The graphs about the essential relationships of three distinct forms of property show us at once that they constitute three different moments in the general development of property relations. Tribal communal property in land and feudal private property appear diametrically opposed to each other *notwithstanding all of the superficial similarity between feudalism and patriarchal or Asiatic forms of property.*

In order to arrive at this reversal of relationships from ancient to feudal forms it was necessary, both theoretically and historically, that the antique form of ownership should develop *first* — the communal ownership in ancient society had to come to a *dialectical split*. The first form of property does not call for any explanation. The individual partakes of the land only by belonging to the collective. There exists as yet no direct relationship between the individual and the land, and thus no private property in any acreage. The antique form of ownership might be characterized by paraphrasing Marx: the individual is in part co-owner (possessor) of the communal land, as a communal member of the "state" and insofar as his share extends to the collective; in part, however, he is already a proprietor outside the *ager publicus*. His citizenship is indeed based on the latter circumstance. Finally, in the Germanic form the individual is a private property owner, and only as such is he a possessor (co-owner) of the public, communal land which become mere accessories.

Clearly, we are faced with three stages of one and the same process of development: the sequence of these three schemata constitutes the *general road of humanity* from the ancient tribal commune to feudalism, from landed property based on the preexisting community to landed property wholly freed from this precondition. (It is only necessary to indicate that from feudal times onward the direction of development actual changes its direction: Beginning with the reabsorption of smallholders' landed property into higher units and sometimes with the nationalization of feudal latifundia too, capitalism began to liquidate small private property of the peasantry. The true and superior form of collective property in land, a much higher level than in the ancient community, occurs only in modern socialism — in communism.)

Objections might be raised in some quarters that the schemata we have given, as well as Marx's own characterizations, are too one-sided. Nothing has been said, for instance, about the class relations of Asiatic despotism, about ancient slavery, or about medieval serfdom. While much is lacking in our schemata, it cannot be assumed that Marx in the *Grundrisse* was unaware of these things. All he wished to do was to emphasize the *essential* characteristics of property relations. He considered them the starting point of all later changes and internal connections in the history of property. On the other hand, he considered that slavery and serfdom could only grow, based on the described ownership forms of Graeco-Roman antiquity and of the Germanic realm, respectively. It also implies that it is precisely these secondary developments which contributed to the decline and fall of the antique and Germanic forms of property. Marx stated the factors of the erosion of the antique form of ownership as

follows: "Evolution of slavery, concentration of landed property, exchange, a monetary economy, conquest, etc., as among the Romans. All these appeared . . . up to a point to be compatible with the base, and merely innocent extensions of it, or else, as mere abuses arising from it. Considerable developments are thus possible within a given sphere."¹⁷

It must be said that both slavery and serfdom are necessary developments within the framework of ancient tribal communal ownership, too. Naturally, slavery appears even more necessary when antique forms, and serfdom when Germanic forms of ownership are fully developed. Thus we arrive here at the question of the reproduction of types of relationships of production. We are asking in other words how it came about that the law of development embodied in our above schemata likewise led to the reproduction of these forms and finally to their gradual decay and disappearance. In short we are looking for what happened during the incipient stages of the "secondary" changes and during the fully developed stages of the Asiatic, the antique, and the Germanic-medieval modes of production.

This is what the *Grundrisse* states concerning the developments based on the "Asiatic" mode of production: "The only barrier which the community can encounter in its relations to the natural conditions of production *as its own* — to the land — is some *other community*, which has already laid claim to them as its inorganic body. War is therefore one of the earliest tasks of every primitive community of this kind, both for the defence of property and for its acquisition. (It will be sufficient to speak of original property in land, for among pastoral peoples property in such natural products of the earth as, e.g. sheep is at the same time property in the pastures they pass through. In general, property in land includes property in its organic products.) Where man himself is captured as an organic accessory of the land and together with it, he is captured as one of the conditions of production, and this is the origin of slavery and serfdom, which soon debase and modify the original forms of all communities, and themselves become their foundation. As a result the simple structure is thereby determined negatively."¹⁸ And a little further we read: "The fundamental condition of property based on tribalism (which is originally formed out of the community) is to be a member of the tribe. Consequently a tribe conquered and subjugated by another becomes *propertyless* and part of the *inorganic conditions* of the conquering tribe's reproduction, which that community regards as its own. Slavery and serfdom are therefore simply further developments of property based on tribalism. They necessarily modify all its forms. This they are least able to do in the Asiatic form. In the self-sustaining unity of manufactures and agriculture on which this form is based, conquest is not so essential a condition as where *landed property, agriculture*, predominate exclusively. On the other hand, since the individual in this form never becomes an owner but only a possessor, he is at bottom himself the property, the slave of that which embodies the unity of the community. Here slavery neither puts an end to the conditions of labour, nor does it modify the essential relationship."¹⁹

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

If we take a look at our schema of the "Asiatic" mode of production it becomes at once obvious that neither slavery nor serfdom are able by themselves to bring about any essential change in it. If the community conquers another community or some single individuals separated from their community, the conquered simply become the property of this victorious community. If the head of a household or the official, into whose power a slave or serf may have fallen, has not yet become severed from the "navel-string" of the community — if their power is based, as always in Asia, on the communal ownership of land — then the conquered enter into a relationship with him that is identical to that of the members of the community vis-à-vis its representative. For this very reason there exists no essential social difference between the Oriental type of slavery and serfdom and the slave-serf and the "free" person in these regions. They are all members of the community and they all owe tribute to the representatives of the community. This is why we do not identify this "general slavery" with the antique slavery, or with the medieval serfdom. This is merely a *patriarchal* dependency, or, slavery based on tribal communal ownership.

Let us now see how slavery develops on the basis of the antique form of ownership and how it reacts upon its base: "Once the city of Rome had been built and its surrounding land cultivated by its citizens, the conditions of the community were different from what they had been before. The object of all these communities is preservation, i.e. the production of the individuals which constitute them as proprietors, i.e. in the same objective mode of existence, which also forms the relationship of the members to each other, and therefore forms the community itself. But this reproduction is at the same time necessarily new production and the destruction of the old form. — For instance, where each individual is supposed to possess so many acres of land, the mere increase in population constitutes an obstacle. If this is to be overcome, colonisation will develop and this necessitates wars of conquest. This leads to slavery, etc., also, e.g. the enlargement of the *ager publicus*, and hence to the rise of the Patricians, who represent the community, etc. Thus the preservation of the ancient community implies the destruction of the conditions upon which it rests, and turns into its opposite. Suppose, for instance, that productivity could be increased without increase in territory, by means of a development of the forces of production (which in agriculture, a most traditional occupation, are the slowest of all.) This would imply new methods and combinations of labour, the high proportion of the day which would then have to be devoted to agriculture, etc., and once again the old economic conditions of the community would cease to operate."²⁰

In its process of reproduction, under conditions of scarcity in land, the antique form of ownership leads to wars of conquest, and thus to slavery. It is essentially different from its Asiatic counterpart since the community which takes prisoners consists here of private property owners. The problem then is: Should the slaves become part of the public domain or should they become private property? The struggle ends predictably in the victory of the principle of private slaveholding. This, however, turns even the once private property owners in the long run into slaves. In the words of Marx: "The act of reproduction itself changes not only the objective conditions — e.g. transforming village into town, the wilderness into agricultural clearings, etc.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

— but the producers change with it, by the emergence of new qualities, by transforming and developing themselves in production, forming new powers and new conceptions, new modes of intercourse, new needs, and new speech. — The more traditional the mode of production itself, i.e. the more the *real process* of appropriation remains the same, the more unchanging will the ancient forms of property be and therefore also the community as a whole. (Note that the traditional mode persists for a long time in agriculture and even longer in the oriental combination of agriculture and manufacture). Where the members of the community have already acquired separate existence as private proprietors from their collective existence as an urban community and owners of the urban territory, conditions already arise which allow the individual to *lose* his property, i.e. the double relationship which makes him both a citizen with equal status, a member of the community, and a *proprietor*. In the oriental form this *loss* is hardly possible, except as a result of entirely external influences, for the individual member of the community never establishes so independent a relation to it as to enable him to lose his (objective, economic) tie with it. He is firmly rooted. This is also an aspect of the union of manufacture and agriculture, of town (in this instance the village) and country. Among the ancients manufacture already appears as corruption (fit business for freedmen, clients and foreigners), etc. Productive labour is freed from its pure subordination to agriculture, where it is the domestic labour of free persons, destined only for the purpose of farming, and war or religious observance and communal tasks such as the construction of houses, roads or temples. This development, which necessarily arises from intercourse with foreigners, from slaves, the desire to exchange the surplus product, etc., dissolves the mode of production upon which the community rests, and with it the *objectively individual man* — i.e. the individual determined as a Greek, a Roman, etc. Exchange has the same effect, and so has indebtedness, etc.”²¹

And if we examine the pattern of the antique form of property from the viewpoint of slavery, commerce, etc., that is, searching for the elements contradictory to the former that had perforce come into being on the original basis — then we have to conclude that this development and, finally, disintegration, is but the historical evolution of the relations recorded in the basic model. The dual form of ownership or the contradiction between public and private property in land offered the opportunity for further historical evolution. On the other hand, this evolution deepened and broadened the original contradiction. This is also the reason why the above schema of antique property in its application to concrete historical circumstances of society can be put as follows: In the beginning of the development of cities the individual is co-owner of the *ager publicus* and proprietor of another specific piece of land merely by his membership in the (Patrician) community. However, individuals soon appear as proprietors who are not members of the community and thus also not entitled to the use of the *ager publicus* — the Plebeians. The latter initiate a struggle for admittance into the original community, on the basis of their ownership of private property, which they had acquired previously. This struggle is ultimately won by them. The original community changes after the absorption of the plebeians as full citizens into another type of community — the *populus Romanus*. It then becomes

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 93–94.

clear that the appearance of the new owners with their more developed legal form of private property was made possible by the older form of property in antique society and that commerce and the circulation of money fostered and reinforced it, assuring economic and political victory.

The final decision was rendered by the appearance of slavery in its antique, *private property* form. The difference between the two forms of property in antique society which is implied in our schema is that in the earlier form the precondition of property rights is membership in the community (of the original founders of the town), whereas in the latter form it is property which determines membership in the community. In this respect the older form resembles the "Asiatic" mode of production and property, while the newer form resembles the "Germanic" or feudal form. All the important moments of the development in Graeco-Roman, i.e. antique society are based upon these two contradictory forms of property, their unity in opposition, and their struggle with each other.

When the founders of the city of Rome had "acquired separate existence as private proprietors from their collective existence," they laid the foundations for more developed forms of private property. It is clear that commerce and the accumulation of money were bound to assist in the process, in the interests of the ever new and "foreign" strata of property owners. Slavery too could then reach a stage at which the basis of ownership of the *nouveaux riches* had no connection whatsoever to membership in a community. This is precisely the reason why the antique form of slavery, i.e. slavery based on true private property, could only develop on the basis of antique property relations. It could only develop in the cities of Greece and Rome, where it later became the foundation of production. Among all the forms of property, only the antique form gave rise to true slavery as a precondition of its own reproduction and ultimately its own destruction. This close nexus between slavery and the antique mode of production needs to be stressed since it has become popular recently to deny the slaveholding character of Greek and Roman society.

Seen in this light it becomes clear that serfdom could only develop on the basis of the "Germanic" form of property relations. An essential precondition of the development of capitalism rests, moreover, upon feudal property relations. These and similar questions, however, belong only loosely in our present context. While we have dealt with some of these points we are not in the position to discuss them in detail here.

From Marx's analysis of the reproduction of the various forms of ownership and their decay it is quite evident that he saw in the forms of ownership nothing but expressions of the relations of production. These relations constitute the economic basis of separate modes of production respectively. This is expressly stated in the *Grundrisse*: "We have an original unity between a specific form of community or tribal unit and the property in nature connected with it, or the relation to the objective conditions of production as naturally existing, as the objective being of the individual by means of the community. Now this unity, which in one sense appears as the particular form of property, has its living reality in a specific *mode of production* itself, and this mode appears equally as the relationship of the individuals to one another and as their specific daily behaviour towards inorganic nature, their specific mode of labour (which is always family labour and often communal labour). The

community itself appears as the first great force of production; special kinds of conditions of production (e.g. animal husbandry, agriculture) lead to the evolution of a special mode of production and special forces of production, both objective and subjective, the latter appearing as qualities of the individuals."²²

Marx then sums up his conclusions succinctly: "*Property* — and this applies to its Asiatic, Slavonic, ancient classical and Germanic forms — therefore originally signifies a relation of the working (producing) subject (or a subject reproducing himself) to the conditions of his production or reproduction as his own. Hence, according to the conditions of production, property will take different forms. The object of production itself is to reproduce the producer in and together with these objective conditions of his existence. This behaviour as a proprietor — which is not the result but the precondition of labour, i.e. of production — assumes a specific existence of the individual as part of a tribal or communal entity (whose property he is himself up to a certain point). Slavery, serfdom, etc., where the labourer himself appears among the natural conditions of production for a third individual or community — and where property therefore is no longer the relationship of the independently labouring individual to the objective conditions of labour — is always secondary, never primary, although it is the necessary and logical result of property founded upon the community and upon labour in the community. (This character of slavery does *not* apply to the general slavery of the Orient, which is so considered *only* from the European point of view.) — It is of course easy to imagine a powerful, physically superior person, who first captures animals and then captures men in order to make them catch animals for him; in brief, one who uses man as a naturally occurring condition for his reproduction like any other living natural thing; his own labour being exhausted in the act of domination. But such a view is stupid, though it may be correct from the point of view of a given tribal or communal entity; for it takes the *isolated* man as its starting-point. But man is only individualised through the process of history."²³

Two points in this summary by Marx call for special emphasis:

1. The three forms of property relations are based on the previous existence of communalism. It is a historical fact that the "Asiatic" as well as the Graeco-Roman and the feudal forms are further developments of the tribal form of ownership. These express a universal law of development. This is by no means accidental since it expresses that every form of private property must be preceded by a stage of tribal communal ownership from the viewpoint of the total development of all mankind. (This holds true both for the various individual forms singly and for humanity as a whole. The explicit representation of this law was left out of the graphic schemata as drawn by us about ownership relations. This is, in part, justified by the fact that it only fails to appear completely in our schemata of the "Germanic" form and also by that the sequence of the three forms *does* embody the law in the sense of total development in time.) It follows that an understanding of the antique form of slavery and the medieval form of European serfdom is possible if and only if we consider the antique and "Germanic" formations as *negations* of the tribal form of ownership.

²² *Op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

2. Antique slavery and medieval serfdom "where the labourer himself appears among the natural conditions of production for a third individual or community" could only develop within the framework of Graeco-Roman and feudal property relations respectively. On the basis of tribal communal ownership — its Asiatic continuation included — they could only appear in a specific patriarchal form and no other. This latter form, however, integrates itself easily into the relations of general subjugation, into the Asiatic system of "general slavery". If this be true, it is hardly permissible to call the Asiatic mode of production a slaveholding society, or a feudal society, or even an Asiatic "specialization" of these latter modes of production. They radically differ from the Asiatic mode and from each other, in respect to property relations and their "living reality", the totality of the mode of production. For all these reasons let us conclude that we consider it to be entirely justified and in full concordance with Marx to make use of the category of "Asiatic mode of production" and to treat it as essentially different from the antique and the feudal modes.

It can legitimately be questioned what the historical place and role of the Asiatic mode of production is. What is its significance within the general development of human society whose stages are characterized by the three pre-capitalistic forms of ownership? It is evident that the first form or tribal form of ownership should not be called Asiatic, but simply tribal or ancient communalism. In most instances Marx calls it "tribal", and when speaking of its concrete historical embodiments he was inclined to use a designation such as Indian, Slavonic, etc. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels wrote that the first or tribal form of ownership represents the natural basis of the society of hunting-gathering and pastoral peoples. "At most", as they put it, it survives in the stage of sedentary agriculture.

We have seen in the *Grundrisse* that "special kinds of conditions of production (e.g. animal husbandry, agriculture) lead to the evolution of a special mode of production". It should be clear that with the appearance of agriculture, with the change of "conditions of production", the older formation has to transform itself; tribal communalism is bound to change into a higher, more efficient mode of production. All that remains problematic is what kind of new mode of production develops necessarily, according to Marx, once the stage of agriculture has been reached.

In our opinion, in their youth, Marx, and Engels, must have held the antique mode of production to be adequate for the stage of agriculture. The survival of communal property, the basis of the older form of production, has also (in *The German Ideology*) been characterized in the stage of agriculture with the qualifier "at most". This is why Marx distinguished, on the basis of the character of division of labour, *two forms or stages in the beginning of agricultural society*: the Oriental type of unity of manufacture and agriculture, and the stage of their respective separation. The unity of agriculture and manufacture does not accelerate progress, but on the contrary, slows it down. It prevents the full development of the forces of production, although they may move slowly forward. It prevents, in short, the old mode of production from being disintegrated. The separation of manufacture and agriculture leads, on the other hand, to the total decay of the ancient communal mode of production, and what is more, to the rise and development of the antique mode.

The concept of the "grand divisions of social labour" — as formulated in its accepted sense by Engels — is thus an organic part of the historical doctrine of classical

Marxism. It appears to be valid and applicable with regard to the totality as well as the details of historical development. It is an important law of development; only we must see in this law as in all laws of development merely a tendency, inherent in the process, which leads to real social progress. But alongside this *typical or general* path of social development there also exists stagnation, or even decay. These are real possibilities, since the typical path of development may be prevented by special circumstances or by the very absence of such specific conditions that are necessary for its emergence. This explains why Engels considered the pre-Columbian "civilizations" to be stages of arrested development which stopped short at the middle stage of "barbarism" and were unable to join the general march of social progress.²⁴

In order to locate the Asiatic mode of production from the viewpoint of the general evolutionary process we have to start from the fact that this mode of production, as regards its property relationships, is inseparable from and is founded on the property relationships of the primitive communal system; hence it employs and modifies the institutions of the same. The question then is concerned with the form in which this modification of ancient ways takes place and its results. We were able to determine from the passages from Marx and Engels that they saw in the appearance of *exploitation* the essence of this modification of ancient tribal community into the "Asiatic" society. The determination of the proper historical place of the Asiatic mode of production depends wholly upon a proper understanding of the type of exploitation. The quoted passage shows without doubt that Marx and Engels saw the basis of this exploitation not in the existence of private property in land but in communal ownership. The appropriation of ground rent on the basis of communal ownership characterizes the Asiatic form and it is a patriarchal, arrested, not really explicit, and contradictory form of exploitation. This is why it constitutes only a brief and passing stage in the typical path of social development: in Greece and Rome in the "golden age" and among the Germanic peoples in the incipient stages of feudalism. We can thus speak of a transitory and atypical form of exploitation. On the typical path it rapidly gives way to other forms of exploitation, based upon various forms of real private property. In antiquity, exploitation was based on slavery and in the European middle ages on serfdom. (Needless to say, the earlier and transitory form of exploitation does appear in the typical path of development as well, but it quickly gives way to new forms, subordinating itself to them and thus reinforcing these forms.)

What else but a transitory form of exploitation could correspond to the transitory phase of the division of labour, as given in the "extended family"? It is quite naturally only transitory in character. The stratification of society at this stage also merely represents a widening of the framework of the extended family.

With this we have arrived at the most controversial issue in this entire field of problems: How can the Asiatic mode of production be called a class riven society? Can this be done, based solely on our previous considerations?

The degree of democracy or despotism arising from tribal communities depends in the view of Marx on the degrees of their modification by migrations, conquests,

²⁴ K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Works*, vol. III, pp. 206-207.

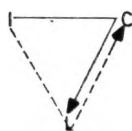
and admixtures of peoples and the increase of population. It cannot be seriously doubted that this modification of the original tribal communities stands in direct relation to the degree of augmentation of the community by the subjugation and incorporation of other similar communities. This process is accompanied — alongside the partial preservation of the older communities — by the emergence of more comprehensive and “higher” forms of communities. Smaller communities, if they can maintain themselves at all, stay naturally closer to their originals and remain more democratic than the larger ones. Clearly, there is need in these ever larger forms of communities for more authority in order to assure cohesion and subordination. There is, therefore, greater need for evermore despotic means of administration. Thus it is understandable why Asiatic states based on village communities were inclined to use the most cruel and despotic forms of rule almost without exception, regardless of whether the despots were indigenous to the community or had come as nomadic conquerors from the outside.

It is primarily the kinship connections in and between the village communities which remain in their original pristine form, whereas in the “higher” communities original tribal formations transformed themselves into administrative units and states and then into tax-collecting apparatuses above the communities. From the viewpoint of the taxed village communities this apparatus appears as the instrument of “general enslavement” and exploitation. This very natural development is enhanced by the existence of an abundance of arable land which leads to the continued enlargement and multiplication of village communities. Only outer obstacles can arise to this process of growth, for instance, if the frontiers of another realm of power are reached and transgressed.

It need not be demonstrated that the so-called “solution” offered by this extensive method for resolving the economic and social contradictions of communities and states is bound to lead to a greater degree of stagnation within the transitory forms of production. Within these stagnant and ever bigger realms, which become increasingly despotic, two groups tend to emerge. On the one hand, the direct producers and, on the other, those who have become separated from the village community. The latter are the non-producers who appropriate the surplus product as representatives of the broader communities and who begin to take on aspects of an aristocratic way of life.

The relationship of these two groups to the means of production in agriculture is clearly different; the tillers cultivate the land while the aristocratic officialdom acts as the monopolizer of the means of production and as the appropriator of the surplus product — as the real landowner. Of course there exists no genuine private proprietorship in land. The aristocracy behaves as the real landowner only by functioning as the representative of the state. Its relation to the land is still invariably based upon the ancient membership in the “community”.

It should be recognized that there are two different forms of patriarchal possession of the land and these are determined by two different forms of membership in the community. The cultivators within the village community possess and cultivate the land due to their direct membership in the community. The aristocratic officialdom possess the land due to their acting as the representative, as the embodiment of a (higher) community. We may symbolize this twofold relationship as follows:



This schema already incorporates Marx's preceding qualifier "at most" [*höchstens*] so it expresses not the property relations of the original, ancient tribal communities, but their modification in the "Asiatic" states — the relations of the Asiatic mode of production. In this case proprietorship based on direct membership in the community applies without exception only to the cultivators. The broken line in our graph indicates the right of the aristocratic officialdom to collect ground-rent, to possess it and to dispose of it. To be sure, this does not amount to real private property for it is due to a kind of membership in the community and to its representation. Yet it can easily turn, for example through inheritance of office, into forms of property of goods which for practical purposes approximate private property.

Are we thus permitted to speak of two classes living in mutual antagonism, based only on the above duality of membership in the community, especially since this duality can already be discerned within ancient society? The chieftains with a long lineage and similar officials are a distinguished group of persons with great power over the conditions of production. The lesser members of the community assume a servile position vis-à-vis this privileged group.

This objection, however, is only seemingly justified. The use of the broken line in our graph is legitimate only in the case of the "Asiatic" form of communal ownership. In the more "democratic" form of tribal ownership the relationship between chiefs and officials, on the one hand, and commoners, on the other, does not substantially alter the mode of production. The reason is that the chieftains of the clan and other officials of the tribe still continue to serve the real interests of real communities and perform significant public functions. So their revenue from the social surplus returns to the community through direct redistribution and in the form of real services rendered, and therefore we cannot speak about exploitation.

It is precisely one of the characteristics of Asiatic power structures and their "higher communities" that they have lost their connection with the original communities. The "higher communities", almost without exception, became secondary units, artificially sustained by force and violence, which represented nothing more than systems of taxation. If viewed only from above — from the seats of power — they might give the appearance of real and natural communities and this was clearly in the interests of those who benefited from the offices. Yet seen from below, they resembled abstract and unreal entities. (Since these "communities" were, at best, instruments of general enslavement.)

Thus the essence of our schema is this: The cultivators of the village communities possess the land by means of their direct membership in the community, whereas the aristocracy does so only as the representative of "communities" existing only as taxation units, designed, administered and enforced from above. The direct producers and the appropriators of ground rent make up, so to speak, two different communi-

ties, for the basis of community membership in the two instances is not identical. The former, the direct producers, are members of real communities, while the latter, the officials, only of communities of themselves and for themselves. It is for this reason that we can rightfully speak of "exploitation" within the Asiatic mode of production. The officials of the government should be designated here as an exploitative class. Thus there arose a society of separate actual classes and of class conflict between them, although originally and continually based on communal property.

This specifically differentiates the Asiatic mode of production from ancient tribal society and also from its typical decaying or transitory forms in Europe. This then constitutes the basic contradiction of every Oriental society and goes far in explaining ultimately the exotic character of Asia. What else but the need to justify the existence of an "abstract tribalism" (Marx) prompted the "real despots" and their officials to erect pyramids, tremendous temples and stupendous tombs? The lack of private property in land in any codified form becomes in this light the "key to the Oriental heaven", as Marx had put it.

Yet a paradox does exist: We cannot call the Asiatic mode of production truly the first typical form of class society in history, although class division appeared with it for the first time in history. We cannot truly call it the first typical class society because it led to a problematic social structure, which did not signify unambiguous social progress since it did not even overthrow tribal communalism, indeed, it helped conserve it.

Just as the division of labour in this type of society appears to be of a transitory character, so is the division into classes. We must designate the entire type as transitory and really it does appear in every instance when the old forms of tribal society are breaking up. But in the course of the typical development this societal type cannot last very long and the only assurance of further progress is its disappearance. Its transitory character is revealed, for example, in that it was unable to simply obscure slavery under forms of patriarchal dependence — as feudal exploitation was obscured by corporativism in medieval Europe. The Asiatic society rather "dissolves" or generalizes slavery into a universal form of enslavement under the absolute power of the patriarchal state. The transitory unfinished character of this social formation reveals itself also in the lack of any truly clear-cut delineations between the patriarchally exploited and the patriarchally exploiting classes. Even the most common tiller in the village community is the patriarch in his own family. On the other hand, all officials appear as patriarchal slaves of the "higher" representatives of state-community, and the despot on top of this social pyramid appears in the end to be one who rules his subjects as if they *all* constituted his own property. This immensely complicates the class differentiation of the Asiatic mode of production. It is not surprising, however, since such a clearly polarized class structure as we witnessed in European capitalism has never existed elsewhere in history and certainly the older the formation researched, the greater the complexity of social stratification found. It is no wonder that the countless criss-crossings of relationships within the Asiatic mode of production have given rise to a great many mutually contradictory interpretations of its class structure. The plausibility of our main thesis should be established by now that the various kinds of patriarchal dependence-relations within the Asiatic mode of

production are the result of the fact that one group of its people are members of the community in a direct way, whereas others are members only as indirect representatives of an — in part real, in part unreal — communal bond.

In the light of the above, we must state that the societies of Asia are transitory types. The basic contradiction of these societies must be found in the great tension between the simple members of the community and its "public officials."

We ought to take note at this point that an appropriate interpretation of the class character of Asiatic bureaucracies has been impeded by a tendency continuing from the anarchists to contemporary revisionism to consider the functionaries of socialist states as a "new class". (The term "bureaucracy" refers in the above not to the administrative duties of this group but to the deeper underlying privileged utilization of public property by such a group.) The naive argument is that if it were once possible for a class society to arise, based on ancient communalism, an identical development may take place in societies based on modern socialist public property. This can happen, according to this view, in the same way as in the Oriental societies, i.e. through the alienation of public functions, through the transformation of functionaries into a state bureaucracy. For example, it is quite natural for the now bourgeois liberal Wittfogel in his new book to consider even socialist countries "hydraulic societies". It is on the one hand very naive and on the other hand very malicious. Due to the completely ahistorical character of this view, it is difficult to imagine anyone taking it seriously. Therefore it cannot interfere with the scientific solution of the problem of the Asiatic mode of production. Yet it did cause some confusion. It has, for instance, led many Marxists to accept a position where they find it necessary to deny in principle that class societies could ever arise based on communal ownership and that a stratum of officials could ever act under such circumstances as a genuine class.²⁵

This thought is extreme and as unscientific as the other view. The argumentation is evidently bound to run into insurmountable difficulties when faced with the historical facts of Asiatic state despotism, as well as with Marx's and Engels' well-thought-out, unambiguous and philosophically consistent views on the subject. By accepting such a position, all one is able to do is to characterize the societies of Asia as either slaveholding or feudal. Such a characterization is, as we have shown, not only diametrically opposed to the explicit views of Marx and Engels, but in effect it deprives the Marxist categories of social formations of any scientific and explanatory value whatsoever. It is possible, no doubt, to apply these deprived "categories" to any kind of society which shows a superficial resemblance to slaveholding or feudal societies. Such a pseudo-Marxist interpretation, however, is as much lacking in historical sense, as the polemics of a Milovan Djilas.

It is not necessary to state that tribal communal ownership as such or state ownership founded upon it can never simply become the foundation of a class society. What is actually needed is the investigation of how and to what extent the atypical breakdown of ancient communalism had to lead to an incomplete, transitory form

²⁵ J. A. Levada unfortunately falls into the same error in his review of Wittfogel's theories in *Sovetskoe Kitaevdenie*, No. 3, 1958, p. 193.

of class antagonism. At the same time, it can easily be shown how *impossible* it is that a new class could somehow arise based on nationalized, socialist public property.

Thus far we have attempted to illustrate in a number of ways that the development of Oriental society, or more correctly, its stagnation, was the direct product of ancient society in decay. Its contradictions have become apparent in relation to the growth in the forces of production. It is not surprising that this path of development does not constitute the typical path of the development of humanity. This is the less surprising since no nation in history has fully traversed all the phases of development. Only when seen from the viewpoint of the historical development of all humanity can the typical societal path be really discerned.

It also follows that it would serve no purpose if we were to draw analogies between the development of Oriental and European peoples uncritically. It would be all too easy to find data about stagnation and abortive developments within the evolution of any European nation. Such comparisons are of value only when they are made between Oriental evolution and European development as a whole. It was the latter, that — up to the epoch of capitalism — coincided with the “general”, “typical” development of humanity.

We know that Marx and Engels saw a connection between the stagnation of Oriental societies and their relative isolation from the influence of global, especially of European, developments. Engels wrote already in 1847 about the significance of the European machine and tool industry in world history: “All semi-barbarian countries, which until now had been more or less outside historical development and whose industry had until now been based on manufacture, were thus forcibly torn out of their isolation. They bought the cheaper commodities of the English and let their own manufactory workers go to ruin. Thus countries that for thousands of years had made no progress, for example India, were revolutionised through and through, and even China is now marching towards a revolution.”²⁶

Similarly, according to Marx, English colonialism was the unwitting tool of history in ending India's isolation. Thus he wrote in one of his articles of 1853: “The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.”²⁷ Or again: “Steam has brought India into regular and rapid communication with Europe, has connected its chief ports with those of the whole south-eastern ocean, and has revindicated it from the isolated position which was the prime law of its stagnation.”²⁸

It can easily be seen that Marx had evidently the same thing in mind when he singled out isolation as the prime law of Oriental stagnation, and when he named the perpetuation of self-sufficient village communities as the main basis of this stagnation. For this outer isolation is only the other side of the inner structure of Asiatic

²⁶ F. Engels: “Principles of Communism.” In: K. Marx and F. Engels: *Collected Works*, vol. VI, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1976, p. 345.

²⁷ K. Marx: “The British Rule in India”. In: *Op. cit.*, p. 493.

²⁸ K. Marx: “The Future Results of British Rule in India”. In: K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 495.

societies, constituted by an artificially organized network of otherwise isolated village communities. Clearly, both these outer and inner isolations are the result of an inadequate division of labour, social and international. Yet this isolation does not constitute some specific explanation for stagnation in the ancient East any more than the abundance of virgin land. The final decay and the consequent liquidation of the ancient communities could only happen under particular inner and outer preconditions. Taken individually, they seem accidental, but taken as a whole the development did lead to the typical path of general human progress. Wherever these preconditions were lacking or their confluence proved to be unfavorable there results in a quite natural way an inconsistent and distorted development, which necessarily ends in social stagnation. Such, alas, were the reasons why stagnation set in already, so to speak, in the infancy of mankind, a situation of "premature ageing" as Marx had put it. A distorted and unsatisfactory division of labour and historical change led to a stabilization of the transitional phase of development, arresting it so that only capitalism and, in a consistent manner only socialism could overcome it.

Seen from the viewpoint of universal human development, it was first in Hellenism that an attempt was made at the liquidation of Oriental isolationism. Although widespread in Asia it was unsuccessful, as were the Roman conquests. We need not be surprised about this ineffectiveness of Graeco-Roman expansionism upon the conditions of Asia, just as we need not be surprised if we recall our graphic schemata of property relations, and that in these ages social development consisted in definitely severing the "navel-string" of the community. This could not succeed in full as long as there existed — as in antiquity — an incomplete form of landed property (in comparison with feudalism). On the other hand, the fully developed private land-ownership of the "Germanic" form and feudalism is based again on self-sufficiency and isolationism and thus the conquests of European feudalism in the East (Asia Minor, etc.) were of even less influence upon the economic basis of the East than the conquests of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Still, this isolationism of feudal times — which had not meant the isolation of whole communities but rather of individual families and private land holders — did bring about a ripening of capitalist relations of production within the very womb of this society.

Capitalism, thereafter, transformed this isolated and decentralized, if not atomized society into an organic unified whole by way of an unprecedented increase and refinement in the division of labour. It became a global system with the international expansion of the division of labour. In effect it smashed the isolationism of all societies and integrated them into a global market. It thereby prepared the way for an eventual global victory of socialism.

In the epoch of socialism and communism it is obviously impossible for any social stagnation of the Asiatic type to come about because the basis for any such degeneration or deformation of society — isolation of the village community — is lacking, even in the East. Added to this are other novel characteristics of modern society which are of no less importance, such as the urbanization of the village, in contradiction to the earlier Asiatic rurification of the town, or the much quicker pace of development, and so on. All this excludes the stabilization of purely transitory forms of society. There also exists today a socialist consciousness which becomes a real material factor in production. If we bear these points in mind it should become

quite evident how infantile and misleading those theories are which seek to draw analogies between socialist society and the Asiatic mode of production. These views are unscientific on the one hand and constitute in effect nothing but political lies and smears on the other. As Marxists we have nothing to fear from such "analogies" and cannot permit a situation, where the very struggle against them would shut the door to our proper understanding of the earlier Asiatic societies and, indirectly, to a fuller understanding of the real peculiarities of social developments in our own time.

At the same time, by no means does it follow that nothing whatsoever can be learned for the construction of socialism in our own time from the phenomena of class societies which were — perhaps paradoxically — based on communal ownership, and from the experience with state bureaucracies in these Oriental societies. We merely wish to state that current and circumspect queries and analyses would enable us to find some truly useful lessons which can indeed be applied in the building of modern socialism. Public officials in Asia ceased to perform really public and useful functions and turned into a "ruling class" once the original communities which they represented had fallen into decay. Originally the tribal chiefs and officials were nothing more than exponents of these communities. This is an undeniable historical fact and it may well follow that the system of public representation in modern socialism also must be based upon real and not fictional communities. In the contrary case, it may well happen that sporadic atavistic class relations will occasionally appear in socialist society too. Lenin also seems to have drawn this conclusion. He confronted bourgeois parliamentarism with its possibilities for bureaucratization and alienation with the Soviet form of government which, being the representative of real functioning communities, excludes in principle every form of alienation and bureaucratization. Indeed, this form should become the decisive force against bureaucratization. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to pursue this matter further.

The ambiguous downfall of ancient tribal society and the stabilization of stagnant intermediary forms in the East — the Asiatic mode of production before the advent of Greek civilization — could only be called a precondition of antique society in the sense that some factors originating in this development have played a role in the rise of antique private property in land. Yet the direction of the Asiatic mode of production was generally not progressive but as an arrested development it led in particular geographic areas to the stagnation of social relations. Like every arrested, intermediate form of development it did not allow for uninterrupted progress. In and of itself it was unable to overcome stagnation. It is clear why the form of slavery which is based on patriarchal communal ownership is unable to give rise to the private property of slaves. On the contrary, slavery based on communal ownership would have been and has been an impediment to the development of the antique form of slavery which was based on private ownership. The same can be said of many other essential aspects of the Asiatic mode of production. They all served to stabilize and perpetuate the „transitory" form instead of opening the way to adequate social progress. This stagnation did not merely result in stopping at a transitory stage of typical social progress but in a sense it signaled a diverging path of arrested and reactionary development. One consequence of it was that the Asiatic, semi-barbaric

civilizations could only be integrated into the mainstream of human development by capitalism, or, more consistently, by modern socialism.

Let us now briefly summarize our conclusions based on Marx's analyses of property relations in history. As a type of society the Asiatic mode of production is above all a purely transitory socio-economic formation between the ancient communal (tribal) and the antique modes of production. Concerning property relations it is linked to the ancient community, but with regard to the mode of production as a whole and social stratification it fits neither ancient tribal society, nor antiquity based on slaveholding, nor feudalism.

Earlier it was a tendency of some bourgeois writers to render these terms loose and more or less meaningless. Provided we refrain from this and look once more at our graphic schemata, it becomes obvious that the tendency (both implicitly and explicitly) of Marxists in the twenties to define the Asiatic mode of production as the fourth pre-capitalist basic formation was also completely mistaken. We have really no grounds for assuming that the Asiatic mode of production constitutes one of the basic formations of society because it is impossible to imagine a fourth form of pre-capitalist ownership, the "Germanic" form being in complete opposition to the "Asiatic" one and the Graeco-Roman antique form being essentially a struggle and unity of the relations characteristic of the "Asiatic" and "Germanic" forms.

We reiterate that the Asiatic mode of production has only a transitory character. It is also our conviction that our graphic schemata based on Marx's concepts do *not* contradict Engels' theory of basic formations. On the contrary, the proper understanding of the Asiatic mode of production and its place in history is only possible with the use of Engels' concept of basic social formations. Thus, if we eliminate the category of the Asiatic mode of production we would not only obscure our understanding of Oriental development but also any deeper meaning and application of the concept of basic socio-economic formation.

Thus, the Asiatic mode of production constitutes an important and organic segment of Marx's discoveries and explanations in the social sciences. The elimination of the concept would considerably weaken the entire framework of Marxist political economy and theory of history. The essential answers about the much debated Asiatic mode of production were already provided by Marx and Engels. In our age the living proof of the correctness of their answers can be seen in that the "prematurely aged" — the peoples caught in stagnation and underdevelopment — are now quite able to grow up in a very short space of time.

III

A reopening of the question of the Asiatic mode of production is all the more timely not only because the concept appears in new perspective due to the information revealed by the publication of Marx's rough outline of *Capital* in 1939, but also because new material on the ancient East, unearthed by modern historical research, has given considerable support to it. In the main, the new material has served to substantiate the views of Marx and Engels.

The purely mechanical application of the concept of "basic social formation" has, it is true, done considerable damage to concrete research on the ancient East.

It has, in effect, prevented the proper absorption and digestion by Marxists of the ever increasing material about Asia's past. The increase of purely factual data has fortunately also increased pressure in the direction of new interpretations. In many cases obsolete schemes and mental shackles have been shed successfully. We are witnessing now, we believe, more enterprising attempts by Marxists to understand the typically "exotic" character of the East as well as the old societies of Africa and pre-Columbian America.¹ Within the confines of the present essay the author does not wish to utilize all the historical data now available concerning the particular developments of Asian, African, and pre-Columbian American societies. No attempt will be made at an exhaustive presentation of even one of these major social developments. We prefer to give only a cursory survey of the development of one part of Asia, namely China. In the present context this much is mandatory. Only in such a way can we show that the category of the Asiatic mode of production is not an abstract classificatory concept, but on the contrary, that with its help we are able to come to grips with Asian society in its movements, in its concrete historical transformations. The geographic area selected for closer inspection admittedly involves some arbitrariness since China is only one of the countries where the Asiatic mode of production had governed the lives of people.

Being a sinologist, the author feels more emboldened to make scientific statements about China. However, this is not the only reason for the selection. A great deal can be learned from the study of China because until the invasion of capitalism from the West, it remained in the greatest possible isolation, on the one hand, and reached the highest level of development among all of the "Asiatic mode of production" societies, on the other. Chinese society — in its isolation — came closer than any other Asiatic one to the level of "civilisation" (in the meaning of the term as Engels used it). In opposition to the Near East and India, China did not experience the influence of Hellenism, but at the same time it developed — although very slowly — considerably further than the equally isolated Meso- and South-American high cultures or, e.g. the states of Western Africa. Colonialism has interrupted the full development of the potentialities of these societies even though these potentialities may or may not have been very great. For this reason colonialism from the West has unwittingly signaled a new phase in the life of these peoples. In the Near East, on the other hand, the Graeco-Roman campaigns of conquest left considerable, though not a decisive, impact on the development of these historical types of "Asiatic mode of production" and so it is extremely difficult for the historian to decide exactly what elements were due to independent development and to the impact of European Antiquity and what to the interaction between Europe and Asia. The development of Chinese society — since it has taken place in fairly undisturbed isolation for almost three thousand years — is the only one where we can see the full unfolding of the historical laws and trends of the Asiatic mode of production. China thus remains the *locus classicus* for the study of the Asiatic mode of production.

¹ Among recent contributions, that of J. Suret-Canale merits special attention. In his book *Afrique Noire* (Editions Sociales, Paris 1958) he successfully applies the concept of the Asiatic mode of production and elucidates skillfully the historical past of West African states.

The question may be raised, to be sure, to what extent are we permitted at all to speak of "development" within the framework of the Asiatic mode of production. This is a difficult and meaningful question for the historian and somewhat neglected. We shall be able to answer it only at the end of this chapter, only after referring to Marx's and Engels' judgements on this matter. As we have seen, Marx and Engels applied the concept of the Asiatic mode of production in two different ways: on the one hand they meant by it a mode of production that, from the vantage point of the general and typical development of humanity, represented an arrested development in a pre-antique, transitional phase. On the other hand they used it as a designation for the stagnation characterizing the stationary societies of the East before the penetration of Western capitalism.

This twofold application of the term is, however, by no means contradictory. Arrested development implies a stagnant or stationary society which deviates from the main route of civilization. Here it becomes an impediment to social growth in all its aspects. To put it differently: If development in a transitory social formation is arrested, then it must lead to a deformed course of social evolution, in which every new step of the "development" is inconsistent, making it more and more difficult to overcome stagnation.

Marx used very sharp words to describe the unprogressive character of Oriental societies. In the already frequently quoted article of 1853 about India he writes: "All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, strangely complex, rapid and destructive as the successive action in Hindostan may appear, did not go deeper than its surface . . . However changing the political aspect of India's past must appear, its social condition has remained unaltered since its remotest antiquity, until the first decennium of the 19th century."²

Marx stated that Indian society really had no history at all and that "the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia"³ was brought about by the instrumentality of British trade in industrial commodities.

The mechanistic application of the above statement, however, seems to lend support to the imperialistic idea about the innate inability of the East to develop. It was precisely in this fashion that some Japanese historians interpreted it at a time when Japanese armies threw themselves upon China. Such historians have, willfully or inadvertently, lent their support to Japanese imperialism.⁴

Thus it is inevitable that we should reopen the question of the inner potentialities of the Asiatic mode of production and that we should attempt to answer it satisfactorily, precisely with an outline, however rough, of the development of the classical case, that of China. At the same time this will give us an opportunity to examine the question whether the general law of social development as expressed in the succession of the "basic" social formations can be applied to the historical development of a *single* society.

Questions of Chinese prehistory fall outside the scope of our investigation. It is almost impossible at the present stage of our knowledge to discern meaningful

² K. Marx: "The British Rule in India". In: *Op. cit.*, pp. 489 and 490.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 492.

⁴ Lü Chen-yü: *Op. cit.*, p. 53 sqq.

correlations between Confucian traditions and the findings of archaeologists. This highly interesting and important field of investigation remains for the time being a largely speculative endeavour.

Only with the second millennium B.C. is it possible to attempt a scientific periodization of society based on concrete and reliable socio-economic data. We must begin with the Shang-Yin dynasty. As it is well known, the ruins of a "city" were discovered in the neighbourhood of Anyang in what now is the province of Honan. It was the capital, according to tradition, of the Shang-Yin kingdom. Products of handicraft and oracle bones are particularly noteworthy among the rich findings on this site. The discovered inscriptions allow us to gain valuable insight into the economic life of this period and its general structure. We know that animal husbandry played a great role in early China, much more so than in later times. Agriculture was also well developed and a web of tax-collecting offices was already spreading to the villages. Able artisans primarily served the needs of the royal court. The court of the ruler [wang] served as the center of tax-collection. Artisans provided for the maintenance of the tribal or state rituals.⁵ Even more precisely, we may speak of an "Asiatic despotism" basing itself upon tribal communal property in land. Details of this process of formation are still not very clear, yet we know that later nomadic conquests, originating from the Asian steppe periodically, considerably contributed to the development of the system of taxation alongside the traditional channels already existing in tribal societies. Thus we may speak of two forces of development, one from the outside and one from the inside. Theoretically these suffice to explain the beginnings of the Asiatic mode of production in China, and it is very doubtful that further archaeological discoveries will radically alter it.

In the first stage of ancient Chinese history, in the Chou period (1100-300 B.C.), the structure of the Asiatic mode of production was already complete with tax-collectors, rationalizing ideologies, etc. Land and slaves were property of the "community",⁶ and the real tribal community had already disintegrated to such a degree that the old tribal nobility had become a social class—in the exploitative sense. It is interesting to observe, however, that the new class was by no means anxious to destroy the nominal character of ancient communal ownership but rather to preserve it. The aristocracy which had become the officialdom of the state subordinated all natural kinship relations to the interests of patriarchal-bureaucratical exploitation. It raised "tradition" to the status of "law".

It cannot be doubted that the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production fully applies to the Chou period, both economically and sociologically. It is a society arrested midway in its transitory phase at a stage between ancient society and antique slaveholding society. This is the first aspect of the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production to which we have referred earlier.

The fact that society was stabilized in the transitory stage in the Chou period brought on the ominous consequences of lasting social stagnation. It led to a distorted development and, above all, to the chronic impoverishment of the masses of the

⁵ T. V. Stepugina: "K voprosu o sotsial'no-ekonomicheskikh otnosheniiakh v Kitae v 14-12. vv. do n.e.," *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* No. 2, 1952, pp. 57-76.

⁶ F. Tökei: "Les conditions de la propriété foncière dans la Chine de l'époque Tchou", *Acta Antiqua*, Budapest, vol. 6, pp. 245-300.

Chinese people which lasted until modern times. Nevertheless, during the subsequent period of ancient Chinese history, during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.), a certain limited amount of social dynamism can be observed. On one occasion at the end of this period the imperial court nationalized land and slaves.⁷ This indicates that there must have been some private property to begin with. How could such private property in land and slaves have developed? It was precisely its growing power and importance which made the court act against it.

There must have been a development of private property of noticeable economic importance in view of the fact that a change in the forms of property could not have been in the interest of any class in Asiatic society. Taxes were best guaranteed in the eyes of the aristocracy of officials if they were based on communal ownership in the sense of traditional tribal society. The peasant, on the other hand, did not want the end of the community because he still enjoyed at least a modicum of protection by belonging to a village community. Nor was the peasant able to imagine life without such an institution. And as far as slaves were concerned — the lowest rung in the social ladder — it was hardly in their interest to become the private property of more or less arbitrary individuals.

Thus the struggle against old and traditional forms of communal ownership could benefit only an entirely new stratum of society, the merchants, which later in history developed into a new class. It consisted precisely of those individuals who, for some reason, had lost their ties with the community, thus remaining without any protection and deprived of their sources of livelihood. Thus they did not even enjoy a minimum of security. Yet these excluded persons, who for one reason or another, such as war, natural catastrophes, or exile, had become divorced from the life of the community, had at least managed to survive. What is more, they discovered by wandering from one community to another the possibility of trade and commerce and thus, in due time, also the possibility of enriching themselves even more than the officials did from the taxes.

Admittedly, it must have taken considerable time before any really wealthy merchants could emerge in this fashion, since the villagers had only a minimal surplus for trading purposes, as most of it was taken by the taxation. What is more, once the class of new wealth appears in some numbers, it immediately becomes a parasitic class, its interests do not require the breaking up of the traditional subsistence economy, since its economic power rests upon it.

To some extent the interests of the merchants differ, however, from those of the aristocracy and officials. In the final analysis it is in the interest of the merchants only that society should free itself from some of the "natural" communal preconditions — and shackles — effecting the life of individuals and this meant, first of all, from the hold of kinship ties. Curiously enough, towards the end of the Chou era this attitude coincided in part with the tendencies toward growing bureaucratization of the "Asiatic" state, since the latter also, to some extent, imposed restrictions on the importance of blood ties (fight against the power of the nobility, etc.). During the rule of the Chou dynasty the original tribal communities had rapidly decayed, but a

⁷ Cf. Nancy Lee Swann: *Food and Money in Ancient China*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1950, pp. 66 sqq.

centralized authority had not yet fully developed. The old aristocracy was as yet too powerful and the Chou period was rife with bloody struggles by various princes for hegemony. At first there existed innumerable principalities, despotic semi-states, and their number was reduced only in the course of these incessant wars. But none of these could secure legitimacy for any length of time. State power under such conditions of transition and uncertainty cannot remain but weak and unpersuasive; its power still rests on a patriarchally organized and administered army, which as such lacks the required force.

The Chous struggled to extend their rule over all of the Chinese princes but with very limited success. They were only able to establish a loose system of political ties. The majority of the villager's tax payments (rents in kind) as a rule did not go farther than the local despots and princelings and never reached their destination — the Chou court.

The founding of a truly unified Chinese state was the work of Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, the much feared and mighty ruler of the Ch'in dynasty (221-207 B.C.). It was no accident that only the most barbaric principality on the Western frontier succeeded where all the principalities of the center regions had failed. The destruction of the local power of the aristocracy and of governing princes was easier in the West where the Asiatic mode of production had only recently been consolidated, where agriculture with its patriarchal system of rent collection was not yet fully established and stagnation was therefore also less evident. Thus there appeared possibilities for social movement even within the development of the Asiatic mode of production and these societal processes were governed by laws very similar to those of the European historical evolution. There arose, for instance, within the Asiatic mode of production as a whole a certain contradiction between the centralizing tendencies of the royal court and the selfish interests of the local aristocracy gathering wealth. And under "Asiatic" conditions it happened likewise that it was a stratum of the "new" aristocracy of wealthy merchants (emerging usually from members of the "old" one) with which forces pushing for centralization could become allied. It was precisely this temporary concurrence of the centralizing ambitions of despotism and the class interests of the merchants that enabled Ch'in Shih Huang-ti to unify the great multitude of Chinese principalities. The emperor abolished the border-walls which separated these principalities from each other and ordered the erection of the Great Wall. The wall served not only for defense but also as an instrument of unification. Local armies were fused together under a unified command. The emperor also ordered the collection and burning of all Confucian tracts and in their place he attempted to establish an anti-patriarchal official ideology, developed by the so-called Legalists. All these measures were directed against the interests of the old aristocracy, while, on the other hand, they promoted the interests of the patrician merchants.

This brief rule of the Ch'in dynasty — one and a half decade — in comparison with the rule of the aristocracy in the time of the Chous, reminds us somehow of the nature of Greek tyranny. Surely, this tyranny-like power also remained to a large extent strictly traditional. Its semi-patriarchal character was not consistent with any fundamental changes in land tenure. But it succeeded in regard to a more limited objective. It raised the same Asiatic mode of production to a higher level of development and, for a time, "regenerated" and expanded the old system. Under the Ch'in

dynasty nothing reminiscent of the Western social development, such as an intense use of slaves, ever appeared. So in comparison with Europe, the stagnation continued and even deepened. But considering overall Chinese development this was a very significant period, under conditions of isolation it marked a great step forward in overcoming ancient tribal society.

The Han dynasty restored the political position enjoyed by the old patriarchal-aristocratic officialdom. However, the Hans were unable to break the new economic power of the merchants since the power of this stratum rested — as much as that of the state and the court — upon the traditional subsistence economy of the village communities. The merchants increased their riches and their hold on society. The importance of commercial and usury capital grew enormously and as a result the state budget, which depended upon the patriarchal collection of taxes, gradually decreased. The stratum of patrician merchants succeeded to a great extent in making itself indispensable to the state by transporting taxes, and to its officials by aiding them with cash loans when they were in financial distress due to luxury and waste. It seems likely in this light that the “indispensability” of the merchants was the decisive factor in the breakthrough to private property under this dynasty — temporarily, at least. The richest of the merchants were able to acquire land and slaves and use them in the name of an exclusive right. These individuals, who for various, accidental reasons were able to sever the “navel-string” of the community, established their own private property holdings which they had rested from the hands of the state and its officials in return for cash and services.

The origin of private ownership in land in early China in a natural way, seems to contradict what we have stated about the Greek path to private property. In Greece specific historical circumstances were necessary in order to establish private land ownership. At the same time in China, without any fundamental changes in the Asiatic mode of production, private or at least personal property in land and slaves arose on the basis of merchant capital. However — and this is the other and more important side of the coin — its further development also became completely impeded by the same Asiatic, traditional form of ownership.

In European antiquity the development of the Plebeian private property was directly based on the original Patrician form of property; the founders of the city-states held only a part of the acreage as communal property and the rest they divided among themselves as private property. In the Chou and Han periods in China, however, merchants and their “private” properties faced not this dual form of property relations, but a monolithic kind of “Asiatic” communal ownership that carried no possibility in itself which could lead to real private property in land, its only genuine possibility being the unchanged reproduction of itself. The Asiatic mode of production allowed only for a merely *de facto*, shortlived and accidental rise of private property in land and slaves, *and no more*. Notwithstanding the natural way in which it had arisen originally, its incipient forms could lead only in one direction within the rigid framework of the Asiatic mode of production, i.e. they became subordinated to the patriarchal forms of communal ownership and gradually dissolved altogether.

This process of dissolution occurred in a variety of ways in Han China. One of the most significant was the characteristic and recurrent fact that merchants who had

grown rich enough began to purchase government offices in the civil service. They became in turn tax gatherers for the state and subordinated themselves to the traditional hierarchy of officialdom of which they had become a part. Even though they had in probable "clear cases" attained their offices on the basis of private property, they now subordinated their role as holders of private property to that of being public officials. The reverse of this subordination could not happen — as in the case of Roman plebeians acquiring public offices — by the mere fact that the Patrician merchants endowed with state offices actually continued their previous activities, such as money lending at usury rates, etc. They were even better able to do so in their newly acquired capacity as public officials.

Let us conclude then that merchants under the Hans did not bring about any substantial changes within the traditional mode of production in China. If anything, they contributed only to the further impoverishment of the masses. Under conditions of patriarchal land ownership, the owners of commercial and usury capital shared with the existing powers and tax officials the surplus product of society. Merchant capital becomes under such conditions simply fused with the masters of traditional and patriarchal exploitation because it is more profitable for it to do so. Under such circumstances, even if occasionally the newly rich acquired private property in land and in slaves, they could use it only in one way, in "exchange" with the state for office they entered into the ranks of the old aristocracy. In this way, however, their property ceased to be private in any sense, or, at best, it became an accessory, a kind of "household enterprise".

Theoretically speaking, there did exist an alternative. Let us suppose that a merchant did not seek public office but rather profitable channels of investment and decided to acquire more land and slaves. Perhaps he even wished to establish an industrial enterprise by the employment of slave labor and the appropriation of the surplus value thus produced. It is not difficult to understand that in an economy where almost everything belonged to the state, such enterprises would quickly fall under the public domain. Thus it happened that a number of merchants considerably profited during the Han period from the establishment of iron foundries. In no time at all the government established itself in this field and monopolized the casting of iron and supervised iron production. There was then little else for the newly enriched to do but to submit themselves to the inevitable and to make the best of it by themselves becoming the administrators of the state enterprises. In this way at least they remained to a certain extent privileged beneficiaries of the state property.

However, as soon as merchant power became a clearly visible factor in the power struggle, its various endeavours were bound to come into conflict with the older established interests of the local aristocratic officials who were by no means ready to share the benefits of office with any newcomers. The older aristocratic stratum of Chinese society thus began to put pressure on the Han emperors in order to induce them to curb the rising opportunities of merchants in becoming officials of the state. However, once the government complied with these requests and pressures, its decrees boomeranged. Promptly, the government began to suffer from budgetary difficulties. It was subsequently even compelled to increase the tax burden on the producers. In order to broaden its taxpayer basis it involved itself moreover in colonialist adventures of conquest. In spite of such ventures the near bankruptcy of the

government became a chronic malaise. Thus the merchants had their revenge, so to speak, and managed always to come out in fair shape.

In the year 9 A.D., however, Wang Mang, an ambitious and determined minister of state, staged a revolt and took the throne of the Heavenly Empire. He promulgated "reforms" of a truly far-reaching character. His decrees were clearly directed against the interests of the merchant stratum. He prohibited trading in slaves and "divided" the land among the peasants.

Wang Mang's "reforms" appear on the surface to have been of a progressive and beneficently democratic character. Actually, his reforms had quite reactionary purposes and results, since they aimed at, and for a time succeeded in, restoring the autocratic rule of the old patriarchal aristocracy—the exclusive reign of the traditional officials. The new emperor's "reforms" consisted largely in the violent "Asiatic" suppression of the beginnings of private slave and land ownership in China. At first the victory of the "Asiatic" mode of production was certainly backed not merely by the forces of the old established aristocracy but also by the deeply exploited cultivators themselves in the vain hope of benefiting from the prohibition of the slave trade and from the emperor's "land reform". But these hopes could not last too long: in the year 23 A.D. Wang Mang was overthrown in the course of a huge popular uprising. It indicates at least that the well-sounding decrees against the slave trade were not issued in order to defend the slaves but in order to break the excessive and growing influence of the merchants. Likewise, Wang Mang's "land distribution" did not aim at lightening the burden of the tiller of the soil but at renewing the ancient system of taxation and the reducing of budgetary difficulties in general.

In 25 A. D. the Han dynasty was reestablished. The Hans, displayed tolerance toward the merchants and "normalized" the symbiosis between the merchants and the stratum of traditional aristocracy, and this became characteristic for the whole history of ancient China.

The political history of the later Han period consisted, not surprisingly, in power struggles between the two types of privileged layers in the state. The "symbiosis" was frequently disturbed and very crudely so. The state as a whole continued, however, to depend as before upon the patriarchal system of taxation. The chief economic characteristics of the period can be found in the unstable compromise between, and fusion of, commercial capital and patriarchal exploiters on the basis of the unaltered system of traditional village communities with a subsistence economy. Thus the basic economic organization of China remained entirely unaffected by what happened within its interstices, as well as by the events in the "political sky"—the governmental layers of society—just as Marx had suggested in a more general context. The emergence and the later subordination of the private property of slaves and in land itself was thus only a moment in the fight of the ruling strata for the distribution of the surplus production of village communities.

So the ancient Chinese society even in this second, higher state of its development, must be characterized as an "Asiatic" society. But in pointing out the unchanging character of the mode of production in the Chou and the Han periods we must not overlook their partly progressive tendencies. Moreover, we are aware of certain similarities in the typical development of humanity, such as the appearance of a semi-tyranny after the temporary passing of aristocratic rule, the invigorating role

played by "barbarian" invaders, the benefits offered by commerce, etc. Note must be taken, not in the least, of a brief interlude of private property in land. Let us look into this more closely.

Landed property did not appear by way of the transformation of aristocratic tenure in the name of the state into full and real private property. It appeared in a way rather similar to the early "transitional" periods of Greece and Rome. The fact that merchants did obtain private property in land by their breaking away from the community, suggests analogies with the dynamics of the development of private landownership in European antiquity. On this basis, in theory a quasi-antique form of societal movement could have developed in China between private owners and the traditional ruling strata, i.e. the traditional collectors of taxes, beneficiaries of state lands. This tendency toward the growing independence of the individual from his "naturally given" community in China never reached the point from which the antique development in Europe had really been launched: the establishment of the peasant's property-rights to his own plot in its characteristic, antique form. Yet within the development of the Chinese "Asiatic" mode of production the Han period may remind us of the antiquity, though without the slightest possibility for feudal landownership to come about in China. Separation of the individual from the "navel-string" of the community, if at all, necessarily begins by way of striving for antique form of ownership since this is the only way and form of that separation during the era of the ancient world. In Han China this process stopped short of full development, of course. In this way we may perhaps call the Chinese society of the Han period (but only of this period) an "Asiatic slaveholding society", but always with the proviso that this type of society displays its own characteristics in China, which strongly differ from the Greek and Roman types of slavery, that played a major role in human history.

The extreme parasitism of tax collectors and usurious merchants could not be forever endured and supported by an economy which based itself on the inefficient production of village communities. The villages, and consequently, the state household became ever poorer. In 184 A.D. there occurred the tremendous peasant rebellion, known as the Revolt of the Yellow Turbans. It was eventually put down with immense costs in blood and cruelty. This, however, by no means prevented the end of the Han dynasty itself. On the ruins of Han power several dynasties attempted to establish themselves. They too were frustrated one by one, till in the final outcome the "genuine Chinese" dynasties receded to the South of the country, while the North was overrun by "barbaric" tribes and tribal federations of the steppe.

This period of "Southern and Northern kingdoms" (420-589) is characterized by the existence of several smaller Chinese states. Some were erected by the Northern conquerors and some by the old Chinese ruling groups. But the basis of it all, the taxation of the village community, remained unaltered. There are, however, some differences discernible as we pass from region to region. In the South it is the traditional and well experienced bureaucracy collecting the land taxes and continuing the pretensions of collective unity. In the North all this appears as a naked force of the aristocracy of alien nomadic tribes. As a result, in the South the well-ordered character and ambiguous civilization of ancient Chinese society managed to survive, while in the North destruction was indeed of such magnitude that it

prevented the continuation of peaceful patriarchal relations of exploitation. Their place was generally taken by outright robbery and plunder raids in the name of taxation.

The North displayed, however, some new economic phenomena as well in this migratory period of Chinese history and even some modifications of the "Asiatic" form of ownership took place. As no central patriarchal authority existed, it became inevitable for a period of time that the "navel-string" of the community would be severed. The individual and the government became less tied to each other. The governmental apparatus collapsed and left local leaders and heads of extended families to their own devices; they stopped paying taxes, but they were regularly robbed. One may rightly speak of a general condition of anarchy in this phase of Chinese history. Local authorities relied on periodic plunder raids for their income. As we would expect in such times of general distress and insecurity it also became necessary to erect military strongholds. So from this general devastation some "strong Houses" emerged and within their protective perimeters the people were no longer defenseless in face of plunder. A great many village communities perished nonetheless and their surviving members sought and found refuge as soldiers or taxed cultivators within the new system of military fortifications.

Amidst this turmoil of migration and general dislocation, some forms of pseudo-feudal political and economic dependence necessarily arose and here we can already speak of the seeds — or, in any case, of the possibilities — of feudal private property in land. The Northern dynasty of the Wei must have had this new social factor in mind when it revamped its system of taxation. This particular dynasty succeeded by the middle of the 5th century A.D. in bringing all of Northern China under its rule. According to the new system only the agricultural producers were subject to taxation, but in the beginning, the lords of the military strongholds were totally exempt.

Certain qualifications must be added. In the first place, the system was not of an enduring kind. In the second place, land as a whole was the property of the state. On principle, the lords of the "strong Houses" were likewise mere "tenants" in their capacity as officials. But actually they were not bound to pay any taxes, so their tenancy came close to being private property in the feudal sense of the term.

Yet, under conditions of the Asiatic mode of production, however disordered, the new owners of private property in land could not be and were not legally owners in any codified sense, only in point of fact, and this too only temporarily. The Northern dynasty of the Wei at first was dependent on the aid of the lords of the "strong Houses" and therefore concessions were made to these nobles. After the danger had passed, however, and after taxes from the reconquered and recovering village communities began to flow into the coffers of the state more regularly, the government once again started to restrict the independence of its "tenant"-officials. Subsequently, it was ready and able to demolish their power and independence because they could only flourish under conditions of chaos and uncertainty. Their private property in land was retaken by the state. Thus feudalism remained once more abortive within the framework of Chinese social development.

Needless to say, we are reminded here of a process akin to other phases of Chinese history. Under the prevailing mode of production, the only "possibility" for private

property in land was in subordination to the patriarchal system of state property. Those who under the conditions of turmoil had become lords of a feudal character already began to subordinate themselves to the superior rights of the government when they accepted the principle of state ownership to all land and, accordingly, theoretically recognized that their domain depended upon their holding an office as the representatives of the state. Then it was quite natural that in the course of the following development of tax economy the central authority tried to limit their power and independence and reclaim all their land for the public domain.

The success of this policy was due in large part to the villagers' own desire to return to the traditional patriarchal system of taxation. This may appear less surprising if we bear in mind that in the old system of exploitation the seat of authority was more remote than in a quasi-feudal system. In addition, the patriarchal system appeared to be much more desirable, since it was hallowed by tradition and thus appeared to be more in the nature of things. It also offered some very tangible benefits of an economic nature in return for the payment of taxes: it no doubt gave certain military and economic protection. The central power entirely took upon itself the maintenance of an expensive military arm and thus it also absorbed a great deal of idle manpower. Not in the least, the central power directed public works, such as irrigation and flood control. Needless to say, it all served likewise to renew the basis of taxation. It was fairly obvious though to the tiller that neither the "strong Houses" nor the village communities were able to undertake such huge tasks as the government did, with the result that this partial unity of interests between state and tax-paying producers proved to be a formidable obstacle to the emergence of feudal land-ownership in China. The preservation of the system of production peculiar to the Asiatic mode became the guarantee of its recurring reproduction — of the perpetuation of the Asiatic mode of production throughout most of Chinese history.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the Asiatic mode of production does not merely contain within itself the seeds of its perpetuation, but also the cause for the frequent changes in dynasties. The states resting on this base are regularly bound to rise and fall because the process of the reproduction and, perhaps, of the expansion of the village communities, constituting the basis of taxation, is intimately connected in this system with the process of their increasing exploitation and this, in turn, invariably tends to exhaust the very basis of this patriarchal taxation. On another level this implies that the ruling regime loses its power. In addition, feudal forces are always lurking in the background and keep a watchful eye on the weaknesses of the central government. Such forces are always prepared to take advantage of any such weakness. At the proper moment they may attempt to seize the reins of government. Not infrequently they will put themselves at the head of uprisings of the agricultural population. Such rebellions succeed in throwing the entire country into a state of anarchy, which lasts until central authority can be, somehow, reestablished.

Each new dynasty starts its reign by giving concessions to those of the nobility who aided it in the establishment of its rule. As soon as power is consolidated, however, and the patriarchal system of taxation is also reestablished, the new dynasty promptly proceeds to break the power and influence of the nobility. In such periods the quasi-feudal private property in land is again undone and made into part of the public domain.

In this way a cyclical process of change is going on incessantly in the "political sky", while the basic structure of economics remains essentially unchanged.

The Wei dynasty lost its power in the middle of the 6th century and after a period of anarchy it was replaced by the Sui dynasty (581-618), unifying all of China once more in 589. The new dynasty proceeded to build many mighty works of architecture, canals and roads. It also engaged in many successful military campaigns in today's Vietnam and Korea. Yet this dynasty too was destined to fall; the lords succeeded in overthrowing the Sui by leading the struggle of rebellious villagers.

The new dynasty, the T'ang (618-906), became probably the most outstanding of the Chinese middle ages, though not without paying a high price for it. There were several interruptions of the long reign of this dynasty, every time by combined lords' and peasants' rebellions. In 755 the lords occupied even the imperial residential city, in the wake of the An Lu-shan rebellion; in 874 it was the Huang Ch'ao rebellion which endangered the Throne of Heaven, and, after the fall of the T'ang, a century of anarchy followed till the advent of the Sung (960-1279) and so on. Dynastic change was in fact a recurring phenomenon with definite patterns of its own, during the whole history of Chinese emperors. The central power always tried to maintain itself — particularly during the reigns of the T'ang and Sung — by organizing the work of building canals and dams on the one hand and by conquering new territories on the other, thus strengthening and widening its own taxpayer basis. (The T'angs were engaged mainly in conquest and thus accomplished less inside the realm by way of public works. The Sung, however, were forced by invaders from the North to content themselves with a more restricted territory and therefore concentrated more on public works and other improvements.)

At first every dynasty which came to power had to face the conditions created by anarchy. The dynasty made concessions to the nobles who were the quasi-owners of the land. However, with securing the support of the peasantry, each succeeded in reconstituting the patriarchal system of taxation and in restricting the rise of the feudal forms of ownership. The incipient forms of "feudal" landed property may be rooted out in different ways. The state might completely put an end to it by making the lands of the nobility taxable too, or introduce legislation about the restriction of inheritance or exemption from taxation only on the condition of fulfilling government office. The final result was always the same: "Feudal" landed property (just as "antique" earlier) was subjugated to the Asiatic mode of production, it became absorbed in the traditional system of patriarchal exploitation. Thus feudalism could not develop out of the essentially unaltered basis of the Asiatic mode of production in the middle as well as the later periods of Chinese history — as no slaveholding society could have emerged in ancient China — though undoubtedly this period constituted a kind of "feudalistic" epoch in the course and framework of Chinese history. The expression "Asiatic feudalism" may perhaps be used to designate this and similar phases in the development of Asiatic societies so long as we do not forget that the feudal tendencies in question could not attain full maturation and always remained within the general framework of the Asiatic mode of production. But perhaps this expression is put to a better use if we mean by it such types of *European* feudal development as, e.g. the Russian one. However, the proper use of the term

is a rather uninteresting question, if we take care not to mix the various meanings that may be attached to it.

Due to the great discussion which has occupied scholars over the question of Chinese "feudalism", some additional remarks may not be out of order.

It is surely tempting to designate the middle and later periods of Chinese history as "feudal" since the anarchy brought about by the nobility was an ever recurring phenomenon on the one hand, and it cannot be denied that every dynasty came to power with the aid and explicit support of the nobles on the other. Appearance seems to speak in favor of the view that the Chinese state, as the feudal states of medieval Europe, was nothing but an instrument at the service of the class interest of the nobility. The ensuing struggles between the central power and the nobility also resemble their European counterparts. Still, we must guard against oversimplification. First, the noble lords became beneficiaries of patriarchal exploitation not in their role of private proprietors of land, not as a consequence of having feudal domain over land, but by becoming officials of the state. Their actual possession of land served them at most as a stepping stone to these positions. Second, even in the times of "feudal" anarchy the basis of the whole system of the economy, the self-sufficient village community, with its peculiar combination of agriculture and handicraft industry, remained essentially unchanged.

So the state in China never became the servant of feudal interests, if we define these interests as based on private property in land; and under the condition of "feudal" chaos too only some incipient forms of *de facto* feudal landowning domain emerge and with them some forms of dependence that in some respects resemble feudal serfdom. But *smallholder peasant property*, which was one of the pillars of feudalism in Europe, was completely absent in China. Moreover, such smallholder property could arise even less under conditions of recurrent chaos than under more "peaceful" and orderly conditions, based on a strong central power. It will be recalled that European kings in their struggle against the nobles could never look to the support of traditional patriarchal communities. They leaned instead on the support of free peasant proprietors and of their Germanic *Mark*-type village corporations, based on neighborhood nexuses of private landholders. (We are neglecting here the support offered by the bourgeoisie of the European cities since its importance grew rather slowly.) For these reasons the struggle of European central authority against the nobles led to a reproduction of private ownership relations. In China, however, an identical kind of struggle led to the subordination of the beginnings of private property in land under the patriarchal system of state ownership.

There is still another aspect inviting discussion. Is the fact that the "land, together with its cultivators, was held in servitude by the state" (Plekhanov) a sufficient reason for avoiding the term "feudalism" when interpreting the middle and modern ages of Chinese society? Plekhanov was mistaken because he elevated the Chinese state with its officials to an entity which is over and above all class interests. In fact, the state in China did not equally subjugate land and its owners. The nobles did not become an exploited stratum of society at all. On the contrary, the state offered lucrative offices or a share in the proceeds from patriarchal taxation, in compensation for the absence of private property in land. The state accepted the nobles as partners in the exploitation of the villagers

and thus received the nobles back into the confines of the ancient community of those who enjoy the usufructs of tribal communal property. Admittedly though, with the subjugation of private property in land after the periods of anarchy, its proprietors also became in some respects dependent upon the state and upon higher rank officials. (And this is, no doubt, also included in the meaning of "general slavery" under the Asiatic mode of production.) But from the viewpoint of basic class contradictions it still holds true that with this subjugation they as officials became members of the ruling class. Despite their bowing to the state, they enjoyed an even greater opportunity to exploit the village communities. This traditional system of exploitation was actually more effective than the "feudal" exploitation emerging in the times and conditions of social anarchy. It is thus by no means difficult to understand why after periods of anarchy, feudal forces were always ready to support a new dynasty, if the latter was strong enough to promise a centralized government able to keep law and order. This was the recurrent pattern, it will be recalled, in all of China. The Chinese state was obviously also an instrument of their interests, though not in their capacity as "private proprietors" (at best a temporary condition), but in their capacity as potential or actual state officials (as it also expressed the interests of other strata of officials, non-feudal in origin).

As far as the basic problems of the "modification" of the form of ownership are concerned, the foregoing sketch of the lines of social history of the middle and modern ages of China must suffice for our limited purposes. One question needs amplification: What were the variations in the strength of the feudal forces? It seems that the strength of these forces had been growing constantly in the course of time. The Chinese state had to make increasing concessions to the landed property of lords and it became less and less able to control them. At times the state even became the upholder of what appeared to be openly "feudal" rights. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1643) the court felt compelled to establish special imperial estates of its own. This implies that the state could no longer rely solely upon patriarchal exploitation. Revenue from the imperial estates flowed directly — without the mediation of the territorial officials — into the coffers of the court. The court indirectly acknowledged by this step, however, the legitimacy of feudal latifundia and a new legal institution was thus established. In order to compete with the wealth and land of the nobles, the dynasty established landed property for itself.

Despite these developments, we still may not legitimately speak of any full-blown feudalism in China. The Asiatic mode of production in its basic features remained intact because the traditional system of village communities was not affected by these changes. The competition between "private proprietors" (of, in fact, sums of tax) remained a competition of taxation districts belonging to offices.

A potentially more important element than the quantitative increase of private property in land was the appearance of early commercial capitalism. Trade began to flourish in the capital and in Tunhuang near the Western frontier during the T'ang period, but by the Sung period commerce became important in a great number of Southern sea ports too. Chinese mariners and merchants sailed the high seas and even competed with the Arabs, the master sailors and geographers of the waters of Asia.

Even the conquering dynasties from the Northern steppe, which appeared periodically, did not present obstacles to this proto-capitalistic development or what

resembled it outwardly. This includes the Mongol dynasty of the Yüan (1280-1367). The dynasty of the Yüan actually acted as an accelerator of this novel development since it established a modicum of order after an unusually long period of anarchy and destruction. The new order immediately advanced the possibility of trade. This whole development reached its apex under the Ming dynasty, when flourishing cities of trade abounded. But this development was beset by the inner contradictions characteristic of commercial capital in general. In China, as elsewhere, it could foster the development of market production, but it could equally find its profit by inserting itself parasitically into the interstices of a basically subsistence economy. Chinese commercial capitalism could have become the stepping stone to real capitalism only if it had had the opportunity to enter into industrial production. Such an opportunity did not, however, offer itself, despite the existence of considerable inventiveness and basic scientific knowledge. It was impossible for commercial capital in China to enter industry because, within the general framework of the constantly reproduced "Asiatic" relations of production, handicraft was inseparably linked with agriculture in the ancient system of village communities, while industrial opportunities in the towns, to the extent that they did arise, were restricted to the needs — and were mostly also in the hands — of the government. Chinese trade, both internal and external, was luxury centered and even these luxury commodities were mostly the products of state-owned manufactures. The Asiatic state "subjugated" trade to itself as well. It was trade-minded and drew considerable benefits from it, which may have been one of the reasons why Chinese trade never lost a certain parasitic flavor.

Thus indigenous Chinese "capitalism" remained underdeveloped, at a stage of "Asiatic" mercantilism. Commercial capitalism alone never succeeded in bringing about industrial capitalism, here or elsewhere. The expansion and growth opportunities of Italian, Spanish, Dutch and other sprouts of European commercial capitalism became similarly arrested. It was only in England that industrial capitalism made a breakthrough.

Marx observed that capitalist relations of production could grow out of only the ruins of feudalism. The decay of feudal relations of production and ownership was the precondition for the development of industrial capitalism.⁸ What can be said then of China, where the central authority displayed strongly anti-feudal tendencies and always succeeded in subordinating to itself all the quasi-feudal landed property that constitute one of the preconditions of capitalist development? Is the old Chinese state with its strong anti-feudal stance to be considered to be of a progressive or reactionary character?

There is no easy answer to this. The central authority in China — especially since the T'ang period — by its mere existence and organizing power also promoted commercial capitalism. As a result, China during the T'ang period was one of the world's most important centers of civilization, at a time when barbarism ruled in early medieval Europe. It cannot be denied that Chinese proto-capitalism anticipated in some ways its European counterpart — and precisely because of China's central administrative authority.

⁸ Of particular interest from this viewpoint are those interpretations in Marx's *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations* which follow the passages quoted in the previous section of this study.

Seen from a different angle, it is equally true that the Chinese state actively obstructed the development of only one particular form of a rather ambiguous feudal landed property. Unlike developments in Europe, parcelled smallholder property in land held by peasants had not even begun to develop in China at all. It was not the state in China which prevented the development of feudalism, but the general socio-economic context within the Asiatic mode of production. Within this context, social changes could not affect the self-sufficiency of the village communities and were bound to be constrained within the "political sky" and divorced from the masses of the people.

To be sure, feudalism in China might have (in theory) developed in full since its seeds were present, in the form of the quasi-feudal landownership by nobles and they even grew in economic importance in the course of time. For such a development, however, a disruption of the societal core of the old order, of the self-sufficient village community, would have been necessary. And it was not the state which prevented a full development akin to that of Europe, above all the transformation of the traditional village community into a more advanced type of cooperation between small peasant landholders, united on the basis of private landownership and of territoriality. The Chinese state merely profited from the absence of the special historical circumstances which led to the emergence of peasant private property in land in the West. In the light of the foregoing we suggest that the antifeudal attitudes of the Chinese dynasties were nonetheless progressive, all the historically ambiguous accompaniments notwithstanding. These attitudes did engender, after all, a maximum amount of motion and innovation, i.e. making development possible at all, under the then prevailing circumstances of "Asiatic" isolation and of the rigid societal base in the villages.

This whole picture will become even clearer when compared with the different development of Japanese society.

It was during the T'ang period that the Chinese bureaucratic system of government and taxation entered Japan. The system was also transplanted into conquered areas such as Korea, Vietnam, etc. It benefited the "Asiatic" mode of production in China to enlarge its base of taxation by these means. The Chinese empire never succeeded, however, in making Japan a permanent tributary. A full system of the Chinese "Asiatic" mode of production never took root in Japan.

In the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. the Japanese empire was still able to enforce its own centralized system based on taxation. Unlike China, however, the early history of the realm was soon characterized by the great struggle of the nobles among each other, notwithstanding their simultaneous struggle against the central authority of the imperial court. For these reasons we cannot speak of an "Asiatic" mode of production in Japan, except perhaps in a restricted sense. In fact, we are faced here with a type of initial period of feudal development in many respects similar to that which prevailed in Europe under Charlemagne.

During the 9th and 10th centuries the family of the Fujiwara united all the important government offices in its hands. This state of affairs was later successfully challenged by the family of Taira. In turn, it suffered the same fate and the pattern continued. The struggle of the great noble houses and their retainers was fought long and hard with much bloodshed. The Japanese empire was thus in fact a feudal state

at an early date; the central authority itself became an avowed instrument of feudal forces and their narrow class interest and the "Asiatic" features of the society were as supplementary to an exploitation feudal in character as was the case in Tzarist Russia. This feudal development must have been made possible only by the establishment of a feudal type of property relations, the individual's property rights in land ceased to depend upon his membership in a given community, both in the case of feudal lords and peasants. In Japan, the peasant's private plot must have developed early and together with ties of feudal dependence. What made this atypical development possible? In line with our theory of social development, a peculiar coexistence of "accidental" historical circumstances and conditions had to be responsible for the path taken by Japan. It would far exceed our present task to survey all of them in detail, yet we will single out some factors for comment.

A part was certainly played by the specific natural preconditions of Japanese agriculture. In contradistinction with conditions in China, agriculture was not so dependent upon large-scale irrigation and waterworks, and thus upon intensive cooperation. Another special factor was the limitation of central authority, conditioned by Japan's geographical setting. Situated on many isolated islands, it was difficult, if not impossible, to subdue under an all-powerful central authority all the local big men and heads of families. (We are reminded here of the medieval conditions of the German forests.)

Other ecological factors peculiar to Japan might be mentioned. Yet it is more interesting to consider certain historical premises. There had come from China not only an influence which can properly be called "Asiatic", but also an influence which was quasi-feudal in character. While ineffectual, subjugated and supplementary in China itself, it could develop fully in Japanese soil where in some way it succeeded in completely transforming the traditional tribal forms of property relations. Whatever was the way of this transformation, all factors seem to speak in favor of the thesis that Japanese feudalism was provided with an early start.

What were then the gains of Japanese feudalism for the socio-economic development of the country? They were by all means small gains because soon after the initial steps of feudalism Japanese society sank into such a severe "Asiatic" isolation that was rare even in Asian history. Marx wrote as follows of Japan in the middle of the past century: "Japan, with its purely feudal organization of landed property and its developed *petite culture*, gives a much truer picture of the European middle ages than all our history books, dictated as these are, for the most part, by bourgeois prejudices."⁹

Similarly to the end of the Chinese "Asiatic" mode of production, under these circumstances it was only the expansion of Western industrial capitalism which proved able to end Japanese stagnancy and isolation and bring Japan into the mainstream of historical development. It is evident that China was none the worse off for having suppressed the sprouts of feudalism, because in Japan, where feudalism did arise, no further development was possible without contact with European capital. This contact was the only opportunity for the beginning of industrial capitalism in Japan. But on the other hand, Japanese commercial capitalism spurred by foreign influences

⁹ K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 718 (footnote 1).

did rapidly reach a level much higher than ever reached in China. In the Meiji Revolution it secured political power. In a very short time the Japanese bourgeoisie was able to compete internationally. It was able to participate in imperialistic global expansion, though only for a brief period when Japan had succeeded in the considerable military penetration of China and adjacent parts of Asia.

Of course, we cannot completely exclude the possibility that — under the influence of European capitalism — the sprouts of proto-capitalistic development — that were, as already mentioned, present in China, too — could have attained full growth and given rise to a system of industrial capitalism. China was, as late as the 17th century, once again thrown into turmoil and anarchy with conflict between feudal forces and greedy officials. And again the contending parties did not hesitate to seek foreign aid. The Manchus from the North were at first called in to suppress a peasant rebellion, but had soon taken over all of China. They at once began to reorganize the patriarchal system of taxation in order to make it more efficient. This in effect once more perpetuated the Asiatic mode of production. The network of village communities, which had in large part fallen into decay, was reestablished and strengthened by the introduction of a mutual reciprocal guarantee, more ruthless than ever.

In the early 19th century, Western commerce and imperialism were already knocking at the closed doors of China. Some indigenous capital accumulation was already in evidence and the tendencies toward feudalistic independence gained in strength, too. It is impossible to pinpoint exactly the date of the establishment of peasant smallholder property, but it seems very probable that its formation process was ended only after 1911 when the Manchu state-power collapsed.¹⁰

This peasant property became at this time part of a semi-colonialized economy displaying some definite capitalist traits. The "feudal" forces which had succeeded in consolidating their big estates by anchoring them to private law in the modern sense, endeavored to also consolidate them economically. This is one of the reasons why a "Prussian" or "Junker" type of agricultural development was fostered instead of an agricultural system along "American" lines (using these terms in the sense indicated by Lenin). It was only the Chinese communists who were able to dislodge the "Junker" type of agricultural development by means of a radical repartition of the land, introducing a restricted and transitory quasi-"American" type of agriculture just as it had been done in the Soviet Union after 1917.

It is useful in this context to remember the great T'ai-p'ing uprising in the last century when a farmers' state was organized on the basis of communal landownership. The land was divided among the cultivators and land holdings were equalized. Through the strict centralization of taxation they brought into existence an ideal, "democratic" variant of "Asiatic" society. The class rule of old style officials was ended. Officials were henceforth supposed to come only from the ranks of the people.

¹⁰ In *Capital*, vol. III, p. 333, we read that in India and China "... the broad basis of the mode of production here is formed by the unity of small-scale agriculture and home industry, to which in India we should add the form of village communities built upon the common ownership of land, which incidentally, was the original form in China as well". Marx's words indicate that already in the last century it was possible to discern differences between the Chinese village communities and the more archaic Indian ones.

Yet essentially these radical reforms amounted to no more than a temporary democratization of the timeworn Asiatic mode of production. The high-principled rebellion of the Taiping ended in what all central authorities in China had "achieved" — taxation turned into exploitation and officials turned into a new class of bureaucrats. The revolutionary government of the Taiping decayed from within even before it was crushed by imperial forces.

The egalitarian system of land use which the T'ai-p'ing uprising had brought about in its own domain possessed historical significance. It prepared the ground not only ideologically for further revolutionary development but also economically for a capitalist path (of the "American" type) within agricultural evolution.

An equalization of land use also became one of the points in the revolutionary program of Sun Yat-sen (1907). Lenin in 1912 — while acknowledging the honest and subjectively socialist character of Sun's intentions — submitted his program to severe analysis. He pointed out that such a type of land nationalization, i.e. the reform of the central taxation system, a reform "in the spirit of Henry George", constituted a revolutionary idea from a practical point of view but at the same time it was a social Utopia of a *Narodnik* type, insofar as the Chinese leader hoped to escape further capitalist development even though it had already started in China and was necessarily quite irreversible in character.¹¹

But we remember that this criticism was directed at Sun Yat-sen's 1907 platform insofar as it meant to be a program of socialist transformation. It was always Lenin's view "that the peasants' ideas on equality, reactionary and utopian from the standpoint of socialism, are revolutionary from the standpoint of bourgeois democracy".¹² Therefore, equalitarian distribution of land is in fact a revolutionary tradition of bourgeois democratism. All it has in common with socialism is that in most cases a degree of capitalist development (of the "American" type) is a precondition of the socialization of agriculture. The radical repartition of land accomplished by the Chinese communists, abolishing all forms of feudal-capitalist ("Junker") exploitation in the countryside and initiating a restricted form of the "American" way, was a consequent continuation of the demands of the T'ai-p'ing rebels and also of the revolutionary ideas of Sun Yat-sen. The economic consequence of the radical land reform definitively excluded not only the restoration of feudal-capitalism, but also that of the "Asiatic" mode of production. In this latter respect the same economic reasons hold that Lenin indicated when he proved that Plekhanov's fears regarding the "Asiatic" restoration of Russian agriculture are completely unfounded. In China the "Asiatic" mode of production was already overcome in the first phase of the communist revolution, since small peasant property became truly universal. Thus China could become integrated into the mainstream of social development, which was freed of feudal-capitalist and semi-colonial forms.

The Chinese revolution had again demonstrated that although imperialism is capable of bringing about a decay and transformation in societies that have become entangled in the shackles of ancient, traditional forms of social relations, it cannot — nor is it in its interests — open the way for radical social transformation and full

¹¹ Cf. V. I. Lenin: *Collected Works*, vol. 18, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1973, pp. 163–169.

¹² *Op. cit.*, vol. 12, p. 466.

social progress. The development that is introduced by it is embryonic and unsatisfactory. Had it prevailed in China, it might have merely reinforced semi-feudal tendencies or it might have fostered, at best, a "Prussian" kind of feudal-capitalist development. As the Chinese people recognized, it is only a socialist revolution that can radically burst all the old forms and ensure quick and real social development. And the Chinese people had experienced only the necessity to move forward from the "American" form of agricultural development, introduced with the repartition of land, to the development of a socialist agricultural system, to the continuation of the socialist revolution in the countryside. This step is not only necessary because in our days this is the world-wide way of real progress (although in the underdeveloped countries even the "American" form of agricultural capitalism could be called progressive theoretically), but first of all since only socialism is able to liquidate the heritage of backwardness and stagnation of millennia, caused by the Asiatic mode of production.

To mention just one example: in less than a decade the Chinese peasantry became convinced that the limited economic possibilities of the "American way" in China would not fit the purposes of agricultural development and the raising of the peasants' living standards. The division of land after 1949 had an immense social significance, since it irrevocably destroyed the age-old Asiatic system of production. But in itself it was insufficient for creating the conditions in which the social consequences of this stagnating mode of production — economic underdevelopment, the defenselessness of agricultural production against natural calamities and its consequences like famine and chronic poverty, in the countryside — could be liquidated. To found the basis of such a development a new, revolutionary step was necessary: the formation of the voluntary, socialist associations of the peasants.

The transformation of agricultural associations into communes can raise the idea that the Chinese system of agricultural communes had probably restored "Asiatic" despotism and its whole bureaucracy. The fact that the T'ai-p'ing uprising in the last century inevitably revitalized "Asiatic" despotism, notwithstanding the subjective intentions of its officials, seemingly offers a good analogy. The two historical situations are nevertheless completely different. One of the most important institutions of "Asiatic" conditions, the patriarchal Chinese family unit, was irreversibly broken up precisely by the system of communes. The old Chinese mandarin-despotism was not "bureaucratism" in general but patriarchal bureaucratism and the state did not make "laws" in general, to secure exploitation, but it transformed patriarchal tradition into law. And the patriarchal family unit, though subjugated to bureaucratism, was not only one of the most notorious supports of "Asiatic" despotism, but also served to maintain feudal-capitalism of the "Prussian" type and semi-colonial exploitation. Its offshoot forms were even able to fit into the "American" type of smallholdings. This is the reason why possibilities for the personal freedom of young people, women, etc., were brought about precisely by the system of agricultural communes in which, even if artificially, all members have become theoretically equal in rank without basic dependence on kinship ties. Paradoxically, it is the simple truth that today in China the individual's *ultimate* separation from the "navel-string" of the ancient "original" and natural community is not secured by private but by collective landownership, because for the relation of individual and

community this ideally offers conditions of a higher level than those concerning the problems of mere landownership.

Of course, traits of the "Asiatic" heritage still exist in China, though they have already lost most of their original patriarchal foundations. No doubt, the fight against their remnants is to be an important task of Chinese communists for a long time, its whole history being a ceaseless struggle against "petite bourgeois deviation". On April 20, 1945 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party accepted a document on the problems of the history of their party, in which, among others, we read: "Because of their limitations of their ways of life and thinking, and particularly because of China's backward and decentralised social environment of clan and guild organisations, the petty bourgeois are, in organisational matters, liable to tend toward individualism and sectarianism, which separate them from the masses. Such tendencies, when reflected in the Party, take the form of the erroneous 'Left' organisational line as previously mentioned. Such tendencies developed all the easier, because the Party has been for a long time fighting a decentralised guerilla war in the countryside. They are not tendencies towards working for the Party and the people in the spirit of self-sacrifice, but towards exploiting the power and undermining the interests of the Party and the people for personal or sectarian ends; they are therefore incompatible with the Party's principle of forging its links with the masses, the Party's democratic centralism or Party discipline. These tendencies, which undermine the Party's connections with the masses and its internal unity, take various forms, including bureaucracy, patriarchal despotism, misuse of disciplinary measures, authoritarianism, individualist heroism, semi-anarchism, liberalism, extreme democratisation, the assertion of independence, the guild spirit, the sentiment of the mountain-stronghold, favouritism towards townsman and school-mates, factional struggle and rascally tricks."¹³

To return to the history of the old Chinese "Asiatic" mode of production we must conclude that from the viewpoint of global development and the main march of history, this mode of production, arrested in a transitory phase, has indeed no dynamics, no real history at all. Since the potentials of the "Asiatic" development are demonstrated nowhere in more undisturbed form than in the Chinese case (geological, economic, historical, internal and external), it can offer the best evidence of the fact that oriental isolation necessarily implies the stagnation of the economic basis of society. Chinese development, however, just because of its isolation, also teaches us something about the laws of the global development of humanity. China, in its isolation becoming virtually a kind of microcosm of humanity, in the period contemporary with the European ancient world, began to develop some social characteristics akin to those of the socio-economic formation of Graeco-Roman antiquity. During its middle ages it also displayed some elements of feudalism. The ownership form of the "Asiatic" mode of production remained essentially unchanged until the 19th century, that is, until the onslaught of Western imperialism and capitalism, but some social and economic changes could and did occur on the base and in the pores of the old system and the general trend of these changes, as well as many of their partial characteristics, are analogous to the general law and regularities of the

¹³ Mao Tse-tung: *Selected Works*, vol. 4, International Publishers, New York 1956, p. 215.

typical historical development. It was in Europe that these laws manifested their full force and implications and this was due to historical factors peculiar to European development, (primarily) due to the really historical effects of large-scale international intercourse occurring in this part of the world. It had also been one of its consequences that the respective modes of production were brought to their full bloom here by *different* nations.

In China, the main line of typical development was distorted and even arrested because of the lack of these peculiar preconditions, first of all because of its historical isolation. Consequently, we can find here only some signs of the tendencies of the development corresponding to the general trend of human social evolution. In the first period of ancient Chinese history the "Asiatic mode of production" of a transitory type emerged from the essentially unchanged basis of primitive tribal society; then, in the later part of that ancient age, some elements resembling Mediterranean Antiquity, and finally, during its middle ages and modern period, some features similar to European feudalism joined this "Asiatic" basis.

Both the development and non-development of Chinese society thus fully vindicate the validity of Marx's and Engels' concept of the "Asiatic" mode of production as a pre-antique transitory stage of development and as a long-lived stagnation in consequence of being arrested at that stage. Chinese history also demonstrates that this conception is not in contradiction with the theory of basic socio-economic formations since the general trend of typical historical development and the effects of its laws manifest themselves (in a restricted way) even on the basis of the "Asiatic" mode of production.

If the reader is now convinced that without the Marxian category of the "Asiatic" mode of production neither the proper historical dynamics of Asia nor that of the whole of mankind can be understood, then this outline has fully achieved its objective.

July 1960

APPENDIX

A NOTE ON JAPAN

(ORIGINALLY A POSTSCRIPT TO FOREIGN EDITIONS)

The foregoing essay, written in 1960, has been translated into several languages. This welcome development has been, however, somewhat blunted by the fact that I am no longer in complete agreement with some of the formulations. It would seem necessary to alter the text of the newer editions accordingly, but I have decided against this. The *basic* assumptions have not changed and in the meantime so many new problems and insights have been raised, not to speak about the immense new material provided by research on the ancient Orient or just China, that today a much more extensive and more thoroughly argued book would have to be written — a new book in any case. In that case the advantages of the 1960 formulation — brevity and conciseness — could certainly no longer be present.

It was not my intention to exhaust — even in its outlines — all of the problems of Oriental history. The scope of the 1960 manuscript was limited to reopening on the theoretical level the research of the proper nature of “Asiatic” societies. It sought only to stimulate discussion and critical re-evaluation and not to recapitulate all of the problems, especially since in many respects the material is not yet ripe for a conceptual synthesis. Therefore, I have decided to leave the text essentially unaltered in new editions.

One point of my earlier position has changed however, and to such an extent that a special postscript is required. This concerns the inner dynamics, the potentialities for change, within the “Asiatic” development, and in line with this a new theoretical evaluation of Japanese “feudalism”.

My original formulations on this subject were contradictory. On the one hand, I spoke about “Asiatic” stagnation — in accordance with Marx — and on the other hand, misinterpreting a passage in Marx, said that this stagnation was broken through in any case in Japan, since Japanese society did develop feudalism, in the full (historical, European) sense, despite its “Asiatic” environment. This problem, however, became the topic of an international exchange of views. Some of the discussants challenged the statements regarding “Asiatic” stagnation and pointed out that if not an antique, a feudal social formation can develop out of the basis of the “Asiatic” mode of production. Others debated the question of the feudal character of Japanese society in the accepted sense of the term. The latter issue was particularly stressed by Professor Kiyoji Honda, a distinguished sociologist, who reviewed the third chapter of the present book in the March 1966 issue of the scholarly journal *Shisō*. Professor Honda was prepared to agree with my outline of Chinese history as seen in the light of the “Asiatic” mode of production, but he insisted that the identical categories can be applied to Japanese society as well. This coincided with my own reassessment concerning social development in ancient Japan. When the Japanese professor's paper

reached me, I was already well prepared to agree with him. It is indeed necessary to apply the Marxian category of the "Asiatic" mode of production to Japan in order to arrive at a full understanding of the real historical possibilities of social evolution within the "Asiatic" mode of production.

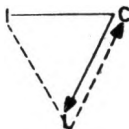
It is perhaps of interest to reiterate how I had arrived at the same views held by Professor Honda. I have been more and more concerned since 1960 with the need to recast and clarify the Marxian concept of *basic social formations*. This investigation led to the writing of *A társadalmi formák elméletéhez* (On the Theory of Social Forms). Two of its chapters are aimed at showing that Stalin gave a faulty interpretation of the Marxian concept of the mode of production and the next three sections deal with the reasons why Marx was led to distinguish precisely five basic social formations, namely the tribal-Asiatic, the antique, the Germanic-feudal, the capitalist and the modern communist social formations. It transcends my present task to report the main line of the argument of this book but I shall provide a bare sketch of some of the conclusions which followed from this outlook regarding the dynamics of the "Asiatic" mode of production. Compared to the dynamics of European antique and feudal society, the dynamics of the "Asiatic" mode of production is ephemeral, ending in a deadlock and basically stagnant. In the course of writing the book, however, I gained new insight into how the changes occurring within this essentially static basis can be characterized conceptually and came to understand that in the Marxian analysis the notion of a three phased historical development must have played a significant role, namely, the three historical phases of the basic socio-economic, i.e., ownership relations of individual, land, and community (I, L, C).

In the initial phase of this triadic development (in the tribal-Asiatic phase) the individuals occupy, in Marx's terms, an *accidental* position, whereas their more or less "natural" community assumes a *substantive* position. In the second phase of the triad (in antiquity) the community is distinct from the separate individuals, having an existence of its own, as the *general* existence of their single individuals. In the third (Germanic-feudal) phase the individuals themselves become substantive, depriving the community of its distinct existence, and force it into an accidental position. (Cf. p. 44 of this volume.)

The quoted passages in the second chapter of my early study clearly illustrate that Marx conceived the sequence of the first three social formations — the tribal Asiatic, the antique and the Germanic-feudal forms of production and ownership — in just this way, both logically and historically. A similar triad was used by Marx to conceptualize logically as one great movement the sequence of pre-capitalist, capitalist and communist forms of production, too, though we cannot demonstrate this here within the framework of a postscript. What is more important here, however, is the fact that the same notion of dialectical triad gives us a clue to the conceptual understanding of the first form, i.e., the development and stagnation of the "Asiatic" form too.

With a closer investigation of Marx's texts quoted in the present book it becomes evident that he understood the transformation of ancient tribal communal ownership into an "Asiatic" one (in the proper sense of this term) as the elevation of the "higher community" (represented earlier by the unity of the tribe) over the village communities, as its gaining a kind of "distinct existence", becoming a separate

and *particular quasi-entity*.¹ In our graphic representation of the “Asiatic” formation we tried to depict this moment of the separation of the *general* (i.e., community) from the *individuals* — a moment that became truly determinant during, and was classically manifested by, the Greek-Roman antiquity. It may be remembered that

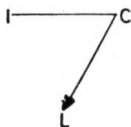


in our schema the broken line I-L-C (individual-land-community) represents the mandarin's landownership, while the line I-C-L symbolizes the determinant relationship that characterizes not only the landownership of the members of village communities, but which is also hidden in the property relations of the mandarins too, since they are only representatives of the higher community. As a whole, this schema also shows what is meant by the characterization of the “Asiatic” mode of production as being “transitory” between the tribal and antique basic forms of social development. But general substance of patriarchy gaining an independent existence in the mandarin's property relations of this transitory form could not furnish a real transition to the truly antique form — that of the *polis* — where the general gaining an independent existence was, in its essence, the common interest of private proprietors.

We can now put the question about the feudalization of the “Asiatic” societies in the following way: Is it possible at all that the general, existing here in a patriarchal form, becomes accidental and the individuals attain a substantive position? In other words, this is the question about the possibility of liquidating the “distinct existence” of Asiatic statism, that of the mandarin, i.e. of the patriarchal general. In 1960 I had put the question in a different, distorted way, and this led me to accept the popular view about a Japanese breakthrough of the “Asiatic” barriers to proceed toward feudalism. However, I now see that in Japan only that type of pseudo-feudal development asserted itself that always occurred in China too, whenever the central authority of the imperial court declined. The conceptually right question already indicates an easy answer: the liquidation of the “distinct existence” of the patriarchal general is also possible and in Asia the classical manifestation of this third phase was the Japanese development.

If we now turn to our schema, we get the following:

TRIBAL



“CHINESE”



“JAPANESE” FORM



This schema, quite naturally, cannot replace the conceptual exposition. Let us recall that the “natural” (at least, as compared to the mandarins' state) community

¹ Cf. K. Marx: *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, pp. 69-71.

based on tribal communal ownership decays in a natural way and yields its place to a patriarchal-bureaucratic state. Officials arise in the name of ancient tribal community and with this the patriarchal general, i.e., the tribalism gains a kind of quasi-independent existence. Naturally, it is a fact of decisive value that, wherever we deal with developments emerging from this basis and wherever there is no, immediate or mediated, influence from European antiquity, the third phase of development — if it takes place at all — can lead to the liquidation of only *this* type of “distinctly existing” general. European feudalism may be characterized by the liquidation of the “independence” of the antique state, expressing the common interests of private proprietors. It raised the individuals as private proprietors to a substantive position, since their *Marks*, guilds or state do not have an independent existence, but exist only as *accidents* of these individuals. But the liquidation of the “distinct existence” of the patriarchal general, i.e., the “Asiatic” state, does not in itself make the individuals gaining the substantive position into private proprietors. They remain individuals of patriarchal character and consequently their newly emerging community also remains patriarchal.

Let us now examine the actual course taken by Japanese history.

Evidence appears to exist for lordly private landownership in Japan, but not for private landownership by simple peasants. In 1960 I had still entertained the hope that evidence for the latter might also be forthcoming through further inquiries. Today, it is clear that peasant proprietorship in land in Japan was hardly possible and that Japanese “feudalism”, unlike European feudalism, could only be a “*feudalism*” of *landlords*.

The mandarin-type of landownership (the Chinese form’s broken line in our schema) in Japan succeeded in emancipating itself from the power of the patriarchal state — a development that in China occurred only temporarily and partially during the upheavals. It succeeded in making the former mandarin-state a mere shadow and instead created a “community” of “accidental” rank, which did not have an existence separate from the individuals, a feudal type of state organization, the so-called Shogunate. But all this does not mean a genuine liquidation of “Asiatic” stagnation since the property relations of the cultivators continued to be essentially patriarchal. In Europe, the seemingly “patriarchal” relationship of dependence between lord and peasant was essentially that of private proprietors; in pre-capitalist Japan, on the other hand, this complicated relationship of dependence was patriarchal in the proper sense of the word. (It is precisely this feature which gives at times the wrong impression that many traits of Japanese pseudo-feudalism were “more feudal” than those of European feudalism.) In other words, tribal communal ownership in Japan developed into the Chinese type of “Asiatic” mode of production, also under the direct impact of the Chinese pattern. In both cases the tribal aristocracy became a mandarin-officialdom with certain (incomplete) forms of landed property. In Japanese history — as it can be documented — just these forms of property relations attained a further development in lordly “private landownership” — a development that corresponds to the third phase of our triad and the result of which superficially resembles the European Germanic form.

It cannot be doubted that Marx had subsumed under the concept of the “Asiatic” mode of production both tribal communal ownership and its modification in the

"Asiatic" sense proper. Had Marx been in the possession of better data on ancient Japan, he would have characterized the Japanese development too as an essentially "Asiatic", patriarchal one. Such is the conclusion to be drawn from the logic of his analysis. Bearing in mind the correlations of his ideas, we must reinterpret also the famous passage in *Capital* where Marx speaks of feudalism in Japan and juxtaposes it to smallholder peasant production. This passage, quoted in the third chapter of this book, is usually invoked to demonstrate the alleged fact that Marx considered Japan to be a feudal society. But a more careful reading of the passage in question shows that Marx confronts only the "feudal organization of landed property" as a system of big estates with that of small-scale cultivation. It is only in this respect that Marx speaks of Japan as the true mirror of the European Middle Ages. But this point is valid even for other examples of the "Asiatic" mode of production (leaving aside the question of manorial economies under European feudalism, about which Marx, it seems, lacked sufficient data), and thus the fact that Marx mentioned Japan as an analogy bears no significance.²

The fact that Japan did reach the third phase of development within the framework of the "Asiatic" mode of production of course had many important consequences for its modern history. While the ancient pseudo-feudalism of Japan was unable to overcome the natural limitations of the "Asiatic" mode of production — it merely emancipated the landed property of the nobles — it did create relatively favorable preconditions for the development of capitalism in a "Prussian way". (Again, however, for the primary benefit of the landowning nobility.) The impetus for this came from the outside, but inner preconditions left their deep mark on the evolution of Japanese capitalism.

Thus it came about that the bourgeois revolution in Japan in the nineteenth century considered among its prime tasks the *restoration* of the power of the emperor, which was destroyed or weakened under the Shogunate. It is for this reason that progressive Japanese thinkers are wont to reject undue analogies between European and Japanese feudalism, considering that even Japanese capitalism bears more than one atavistic earmark of its "Asiatic" preconditions.

All this does not, to be sure, provide even a schematic answer to the problems raised here. Let us merely express the hope that this postscript did succeed, by the clearer formulation of a Marxian question, in redressing a theoretical uncertainty in the book and also in throwing light on a forgotten aspect of Oriental history and its development within its stagnation in the interest of further research.

February 1967

² Cf. K. Marx: *Capital*, vol. I, p. 718 (footnote 1): "Japan, with its purely feudal organization of landed property and its developed *petite culture*, gives a much truer picture of the European Middle Ages than all our history books, dictated as these are, for the most part, by bourgeois prejudices."

LENIN AND THE OBSHCINA QUESTION

(A PREVIOUSLY OMITTED PART OF THE FIRST ESSAY)

The great debates on the Asiatic mode of production had, beyond a theoretical point of view, a political significance as well. Marx's theoretical interest was nourished by his political interest in the spreading of capitalism in Asia. Yet even the direct cause of the debates of the twenties and the thirties consisted in practical-political questions: the problems of evaluating the Chinese revolution and the tasks of the Chinese communists. Hence, in order to obtain a clear understanding of the debates, we have to treat of the political antecedents, or, to be more precise, the theoretical aspect of these, that is the surprisingly early emergence of the question of to what extent and how the prospects of socialism and communism are affected by the survival of the "Asiatic" conditions in numerous parts of the world. Such a political significance of primitive society has never been impugned: the revolution of the proletariat has to "restore", at a higher level, the conditions of primitive classless society. The Asiatic mode of production, however, is not by any means identifiable with primitive society, hence the political conclusions derived from the investigation are not in the slightest degree self-evident. At the same time, it is beyond a doubt that the "Asiatic" society is related to primitive society by an entire gamut of characteristics. Thus the early emergence of dissensions, indeed, conflicts, as to the political repercussions of that society results from its contradictions and the difficulty of theoretically accounting for these contradictions.

In the last decades of the 19th century — simultaneously with the advance of capitalism — revolutionary movements were starting in Russia too. A number of Russian revolutionaries entered into correspondence with Marx and Engels, often asking them the increasingly important question whether the Russian form of the "obshchina" could lead Russian society to socialism. Marx and Engels were eager to find an adequate answer to the question, if for no other reason, because it was not the first time they had encountered it. Engels' article on social conditions in Russia, published in 1875, contains the following: "The communal property of the Russian peasants was discovered about the year 1845 by the Prussian Government Councillor Haxthausen and trumpeted to the world as something absolutely wonderful, although Haxthausen could still have found survivals enough of it in his Westphalian homeland, and, as a government official, it was even part of his duty to know them thoroughly. It was from Haxthausen that Herzen, himself a Russian landowner, first learned that his peasants owned the land in common, and he made use of the fact to describe the Russian peasants as the true vehicles of socialism, as born Communists in contrast to the workers of the aging, decayed European West, who would first have to go through the ordeal of acquiring socialism artificially. From Herzen this knowledge came to Bakunin, and from

Bakunin to Mr. Tkachov.”¹ Against this romantic view, Marx and Engels emphasized repeatedly that the village community was not a specifically Russian phenomenon but one to be detected in the prehistory of all peoples; moreover, that wherever it had survived it served as a firm foundation for Asiatic oppression.² Yet this is how Engels continues his argumentation in his article quoted above: “It is clear that communal ownership in Russia is long past its period of florescence and to all appearances is moving towards its disintegration. Nevertheless, the possibility undeniably exists of raising this form of society to a higher one, if it should last until circumstances are ripe for that, and if it shows itself capable of development in such manner that the peasants no longer cultivate the land separately, but collectively; of raising it to this higher form without it being necessary for the Russian peasants to go through the intermediate stage of bourgeois small holdings. This, however, can only happen if before the complete break-up of communal ownership, a proletarian revolution is successfully carried out in Western Europe, creating for the Russian peasant the preconditions requisite for such a transition, particularly the material conditions which he needs if only to carry through the revolution necessarily connected therewith of his agricultural system. It is, therefore, sheer bounce for Mr. Tkachov to say that the Russian peasants, although ‘owners’, are ‘nearer to socialism’ than the propertyless workers of Western Europe. Quite the opposite. If anything can still save Russian communal ownership and give it a chance of growing into a new, really viable form, it is a proletarian revolution in Western Europe.”³

What is of importance for us in Engels’ argumentation is not what he has written about the role of a proletarian revolution in Western Europe but the fact that — having called attention to the survival of the communal property in land being the foundation of tyranny even in Russia — he deemed it *possible* to preserve the form of the village community for socialism, provided that, first, a victorious proletarian revolution integrates it into its own system, and, second, provided capitalism does not destroy it before then. As we shall see, with these two reservations, Engels was absolutely right in his judgement as to the practicability of the form of the village community from the viewpoint of socialism. (His estimation was correct even in that had a proletarian revolution broken out in Western Europe at *that* time, the Russian obshchina might have been “salvaged” for socialism.) The proletarian revolution, however, did not come, and the development of capitalism in Russia was irresistible, which continued to disorganize the obshchina. Marx and Engels took great interest in the process, yet they still did not relinquish the hope that socialism in Russia might subsequently make use of primitive communal forms and traditions.

¹ F. Engels: On Social Relations in Russia. In: K. Marx and F. Engels: *Collected Works*, vol. II, pp. 392–393.

² “Such a complete isolation of the individual communities from one another, which creates throughout the country similar, but the very opposite of common interests, is the natural basis for *Oriental despotism*, and from India to Russia this form of society, wherever it prevailed, has always produced it and always found its complement in it,” wrote Engels. (*Op. cit.*, pp. 394.) The expression “from India to Russia” became the subject of a rather heated debate in Marxist literature.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 395.

Engels wrote to Madame M. K. Kablukova in 1880 that what she had written about the incipient disintegration of the obshchinas and the artels was corroborated for Marx and him by information derived from other sources. Engels felt that the process of disintegration might continue for a long time to come given that in Western Europe the general tendency is socialistic, and when the next shock comes it would be of incomparable strength. He thought that even in Russia, which in the last thirty years had given birth to so many critical minds, the tendency would in due time become strong enough to appeal to the ancient aspiration of the people for association before that aspiration was completely extinguished. Neither did Marx abandon his hopes in this respect. V. I. Zasulich approached him with a question in 1881 and he scrupulously weighed his answer, as eloquently attested to by the brochure-length plan of his answer. Finally he sent a very definite answer, condensed into a few lines, ending with the following words: "... the analysis given in *Capital* assigns no reasons for or against the vitality of the rural community, but the special research into this subject which I conducted, the materials for which I obtained from original sources, has convinced me that this community is the mainspring of Russia's social regeneration, but in order that it might function as such one would first have to eliminate the deleterious influences which assail it from every quarter and then to ensure the conditions normal for spontaneous development."⁴ It is obvious that the condition formulated by Marx is the advent in due time of the proletarian revolution. Yet it is a very significant fact that from the political consequences of their theory touching on the primitive communal system Marx and Engels referred at least so much to the rudimentary forms of primitive society as to make it necessary that from these as much as is possible should be exploited in the course of the socialist revolution.

This view of Marx and Engels is all the more noteworthy because at the same time they were compelled to polemicize with the bourgeois "socialists" in Western Europe, who endeavored to present as socialism that demand of capital that — once it could not subject agriculture *entirely* to its interests — at least the capitalist state should nationalize the land. In connection with a similar theory of Henry George this is what Marx wrote to F. A. Sorge in 1881: "All these 'Socialists' since Collins have this much in common, that they have *wage labour* and hence *capitalist production* in existence and try to bamboozle themselves or the world into believing that by transforming land rent into a state tax *all the evils* of capitalist production would vanish of themselves. The whole thing is thus simply a socialistically decked-out attempt to *save capitalist rule* and actually *re-establish* it on an *even wider basis* than its present one."⁵ And in February 1884, when, according to the evidence of the letter to be quoted, Engels had not yet read Morgan's book but had already read Marx's notes on it, he drew Kautsky's attention to the following things: "It would be a good thing for somebody to take the pains of elucidating the state socialism now rampant by using the example of it in *Java* where its practice is in full bloom. All the material for that will be found in *Java, Or How to Manage a Colony* by I. W. B. Money, Barrister at

⁴ K. Marx to V. I. Zasulich, March 18, 1881, in K. Marx and F. Engels: *Selected Correspondence*, p. 340.

⁵ K. Marx to F. A. Sorge, June 20, 1881, in: *Op. cit.*, p. 343.

Law, London 1861, 2 vols. Here it will be seen how on the basis of the old community communism the Dutch organised production under state control and secured for the people what they considered a quite comfortable existence. The result: the people are kept at the stage of primitive stupidity and 70 million marks (now surely more) are annually collected by the Dutch national treasury. This case is highly interesting and can easily be turned to practical use. Incidentally it is proof of how today primitive communism furnishes there as well as in India and Russia the finest and broadest basis of exploitation and despotism (so long as it is not aroused by some element of modern Communism) and how in the conditions of modern society it turns out to be a crying anachronism (to be removed or further developed) as much as were the independent Mark associations of the original cantons.”⁶

While carrying on this fight, they maintained the view that — as shown by Engels’ above-quoted letter — the “element of modern Communism” could shake up the remnants of primitive society and organize them into a part of socialist society. The development of capitalism, however, continued in Russia, and in the early nineties Engels reached the conclusion that the form of the village community is past serving as a potential “foothold of Russia’s social revival” because its imminent doom is ineluctable. He wrote to N. F. Danielson in 1892 that should Russia continue on the road she had embarked on in 1861, it would mean the ruin of the peasant obshchina. He saw that process as just about consummated, noting that the moment is imminent when, at least in certain districts, the whole of the ancient social institutions of Russian peasant life not only lose their value for the individual peasant but also become an encumbrance, just as it happened earlier in Western Europe. He thought that soon the obshchina would be regarded as just a dream of the past and that its place will be taken by a capitalist Russia. He added that that will mean the loss of a great chance but also that nothing can be done against economic facts. Then in 1893, again to Danielson: “. . . in Russia we have a groundwork of a primitive communistic character, a pre-civilisation *Gentilgesellschaft*, crumbling ruins, it is true, but still serving as the groundwork, the material upon which the capitalistic revolution (for it is a real social revolution) acts and operates . . . As to the Commune, it is only possible so long as differences of wealth among its members are but trifling. As soon as these differences become great, as soon as some of its members become the debt-slaves of the richer members, it can no longer live . . . I am afraid that institution is doomed. But on the other hand, capitalism opens out new views and new hopes. Look at what it has done and is doing in the West. A great nation like yours outlives every crisis. There is no great historical evil without a compensating historical progress. Only the *modus operandi* is changed. Que les destinées s’accomplissent.”⁷

A small group of the Russian Narodniks reached the same conclusion as Engels as early as the beginning of the eighties. They turned against the Narodnik movement and from amongst them Plekhanov wrote a number of significant works against the Narodniks. In his work *Our Differences*, published in 1885, he proved that the village community was on the highroad to disintegration and could not be regarded

⁶ F. Engels to K. Kautsky, February 16, 1884, in: *Op. cit.*, p. 368.

⁷ F. Engels to N. F. Danielson, October 17, 1893, in: *Op. cit.*, pp. 463–465.

as a germ of socialism; on the contrary, the new forces brought about by capitalism, first and foremost the proletariat, must be regarded as the basis of the revolutionary struggle. Yet it was Lenin who dealt the final blow to the Narodnik movement, which by the nineties had become liberal. Starting from his earliest writings still extant, Lenin devoted a whole series of works, based on his own research, to the development of Russian capitalism in the villages and the critique of Narodnik romanticism.

All we have said in connection with the problem of the prospects of the Russian village community is only partly relevant to the problem of the Asiatic mode of production, yet it is inseparable from it. Plekhanov and Lenin took different roads in the first decades of the twentieth century having disagreed, for example, over the question of the nationalization of land. Another factor was that Plekhanov was wrong and Lenin right in his interpretation of the Marxian legacy on the Asiatic mode of production. The radically different views of the two are easy to judge from the polemics carried on over the question of the nationalization of land. At the 4th Congress in Stockholm of the R.S.D.L.P. in 1906 Plekhanov gave the following argument against Lenin's proposed program of the nationalization of land: "Lenin says, 'we shall make nationalisation harmless', but to make nationalisation harmless we must find a guarantee against restoration; and there is not, nor can there be, any such guarantee. Recall the history of France; recall the history of England; in each of these countries, the wide sweep of the revolution was followed by restoration. The same may happen in our country; and our programme must be such that in the event of its application, the harm that may be caused by restoration may be reduced to a minimum. Our programme must eliminate the economic basis of tsarism; but nationalisation of the land effected during the revolutionary period does not eliminate that basis. Therefore, I consider that the demand for nationalisation is an anti-revolutionary demand . . . The situation in our country was such that the land, together with its cultivators, was held in servitude by the state, and on the basis of that servitude Russian despotism developed. To overthrow despotism, it is necessary to do away with its economic basis. Therefore, I am opposed to nationalisation at present."⁸ It is obvious that Plekhanov used the category of the Asiatic mode of production in connection with the Russian conditions in an improper sense and with a dogmatic simplification. Albeit he designated the old Russian society as a "semi-Asiatic order"⁹ according to his interpretation of feudal and state exploitation the latter was basic in Russia for "the land, together with its cultivators, was held in servitude by the state". Old Russian conditions were often referred to by Marx and Engels as Asiatic, yet they primarily thought of the despotic character of state power and its economic base. However, the village community system of "state peasants" in Russia was only *one* of the economic basis of the social system, and it is scarcely to be called in question that its decisive economic basis was the system of feudal private property in land, and the state itself, which, in order to extend its power, depended on the taxes of "free" peasants *as well*, expressed the in-

⁸ Quoted by V. I. Lenin in: *The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905-1907*. In: *Collected Works*, vol. 13, p. 326.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 329.

terests of feudal landed proprietors. Hence, the role of the "Asiatic" tax economy in feudal (and later in capitalist) Russia was exactly what Western European bourgeois "socialism" or the colonizers assigned to this mode of exploitation: the extension of the power of the class, which has become the ruling class by means of its private property, by the methods of primitive society, or to be more precise, of state methods stemming from those of primitive society. Thus Plekhanov's theoretical error — as viewed from the angle important for us — consisted in his regarding Russian feudalism as essentially a variety of the Asiatic mode of production, that is, he could not make a clear distinction between the Asiatic mode of production and feudalism, albeit the two, as regards property relations, are each other's antitheses. And from this error arises another one: Plekhanov did not have a clear enough conception of the role of the "Asiatic" mode of production under the circumstances of a Russia that was rapidly becoming a capitalist country. And this in turn, of course, renders his whole struggle against the Narodnik movement highly problematic. It was precisely on the question that we are concerned with that he compromised with the Narodniks by proposing, instead of nationalization, the municipalization of land.

Lenin wrote the following in 1907 in defense of the nationalization: "In the economic sphere, nationalisation in a bourgeois agrarian revolution is more far-reaching than anything else, because it breaks up *all* the medieval forms of landownership. *At the present time* the peasant farms his own strip of allotment land, a strip of rented landlord's land, and so on. Nationalisation makes it possible to tear down all the fences of landownership to the utmost degree, and to 'clear' all the land for the *new system of economy* suitable to the requirements of capitalism. Of course, even such a clearing affords no guarantee against a return to the old order; to promise the people such a 'guarantee against restoration' would be a swindle. But such a clearing of the old *system of landownership* will enable the new *system of economy* to become so firmly rooted that a return to the old forms of landownership would be extremely difficult, because *no* power on earth *can* arrest the development of capitalism. Under municipalisation, however, a return to the old form of landownership is *easier*, because municipalisation *perpetuates* the 'pale of settlement', the boundary that separates medieval landownership from the new, municipalised form. After nationalisation, restoration will have to break up millions of new, capitalist farms in order to restore the old system of landownership. After municipalisation restoration will not have to break up any farms or to set up any new land boundaries; all it will have to do will be literally to sign a paper *transferring* the lands owned by the municipality X to the noble landlords Y, Z, etc., or to hand over to the landlords the rent from the 'municipalised' lands."¹⁰ Then expatiating upon the question of the removal of the economic bases of despotism, Lenin again quotes Plekhanov's speech in Stockholm: "The following is the most important passage in Plekhanov's speech pertaining to this: 'It is true that the restoration (in France) did not restore the survivals of feudalism; but the equivalent of these survivals in our own country is our old system of feudal attachment of both land and cultivator to the state, our old peculiar nationalisation of the land. It will be all the more easy for our restoration to return to that (*sic!*) nationalisation because you yourselves demand the nationalisa-

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 328.

tion of the land, because you leave that legacy of our old semi-Asiatic order intact . . . ' So, after the restoration, the return to that, i.e., semi-Asiatic, nationalisation 'will be easier' because Lenin (and the peasantry) are *now* demanding nationalisation. What is this? A historico-materialistic or a purely rationalistic 'wordplay'? Is it the *word* 'nationalisation' or certain *economic changes* that facilitate the restoration of the semi-Asiatic conditions? Had Plekhanov thought this matter over he would have realised that municipalisation and division eliminate *one* basis of the Asiatic order, i.e., medieval landlord ownership, but leave another, i.e., medieval allotment ownership. Consequently, in *essence*, in the *economic essence* of the revolution (and not in virtue of the term by which one might designate it), it is nationalisation that *far more radically* eliminates the *economic* basis of Asiatic despotism. Plekhanov's 'conjuring trick' lies in that he described medieval *landownership* with its dependence, its imposts, and its servitude as 'peculiar nationalisation' and skipped the *two* forms of *that* system of landownership: allotments and landlordism. As a result of this juggling with words the real historical question as to what forms of medieval landownership are abolished by one or another agrarian measure is *distorted* . . . Plekhanov constantly betrays a vague 'fear of the peasant revolution' (as I told him in Stockholm . . .), a fear that it may turn out to be economically reactionary and lead, not to the American farmer system, but to medieval servitude. Actually, that is economically impossible. Proof — the Peasant Reform and the subsequent course of evolution. In the Peasant Reform the shell of feudalism (both landlord feudalism and 'state feudalism', which Plekhanov, followed by Martynov, referred to at Stockholm) was very strong. But economic evolution proved *stronger*, and it filled this feudal shell with a *capitalist* content. Despite the obstacles presented by medieval landownership, both peasant and landlord economy developed, although incredibly slowly, *along the bourgeois path*. If there had been any real grounds for Plekhanov's fears of a return to Asiatic despotism, the system of landownership among the state peasants (up to the eighties) and among the former state peasants (after the eighties) should have turned out to be the purest type of 'state feudalism'. Actually, it proved to be freer than the landlord system, because feudal exploitation had already become impossible in the latter half of the nineteenth century. There was less bondage and a more rapid development of a peasant bourgeoisie among the state peasants with 'large landholdings'. Either a slow and painful bourgeois revolution of the Prussian, Junker type, or a rapid, free evolution of the American type is possible in Russia now. Anything else is an illusion."¹¹

In the first place, it is entirely clear from Lenin's answer that he refuses to regard old Russian society as an example of the Asiatic mode of production. He, too, on more than one occasion characterized that society as "semi-Asiatic",¹² yet he considered it to be essentially feudal, and the allotment property in land as well as the manorial estate as only two forms of feudal landed property. And as he saw the feudal content of village community exploitation in the Russian Middle Ages he could also observe

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 329–331.

¹² For instance: "Without a 'clearing' of the medieval agrarian relationships and regulations, partly feudal and partly Asiatic, *there can be no* bourgeois revolution in agriculture . . ." *Op. cit.*, p. 277.

that it is not in the manorial form based upon private property in land but in the form based upon "Asiatic" state ownership that capitalism develops more rapidly.

Lenin — although he never devoted a separate analysis to this question — was absolutely right in his interpretation of the Marxian category of the Asiatic mode of production; unlike Plekhanov, he was able to distinguish it from feudalism, noting that in old Russia not the Asiatic mode of production was in existence. One of the reasons why he could give a more profound analysis than Plekhanov of the peculiarities in Russia of the drift of the village towards capitalism is because he did not turn despotism resting on the Asiatic mode of production into a supra-class category (cf.: "the land, together with its cultivators was held in servitude by the state") but kept in view the class content of Tsarist despotism. Thus it was that he could discover in the Russian peasant the "radical bourgeois" who still has the "courage" for realizing the consistent bourgeois demand of the nationalization of land, for it is by this means that he can best ensure the capitalist development of agriculture, and because he has not yet "territorialised", that is, has not yet obtained as firm a foothold on the ground as the West European capitalist.¹³ And, on the other hand, he could realize that under the new conditions the power of Tsarist despotism is based not on the "Asiatic" but on the private-ownership-in-land form: "To save what it could, the autocracy had to introduce the policy of forcibly breaking up the villager communes in favour of private ownership of land, i.e., to base the counter-revolution, not on the peasants' vague talk about nationalisation (the land belongs to the 'commune', and so on), but on the *only possible economic* basis upon which the power of the landlords could be retained, i.e., *capitalist* evolution on the Prussian model."¹⁴ And supplying the final answer to Plekhanov, he was entirely justified in drawing the inference that "... it is high time to put away forever the vague fear of 'Asiatic' restoration roused by the peasant movement against the private ownership of land".¹⁵

With the program of nationalization (and its effectuation in the October Revolution) Lenin not only chose the best way of solving the peasant problem but he also found the only possible way in Russia of enabling the revolution of the proletariat to, in the words of Engels, appeal to the ancient aspiration of the people for association, before that aspiration is completely extinguished. In semblance — and most assuredly in its subjective aspiration — it is the program of municipalization put forward by Plekhanov and his group that pays more attention to the prospects of socialism for it transfers estates to the ownership of village communities, whereas Lenin spoke for ensuring the evolutionary possibilities to the American type of farmer capitalism. This semblance certainly had an important role in the popularity of the municipalization program within the party and in inducing the Congress of Stockholm — as it is well known — to accept on this question the Menshevik proposal. Lenin, however, did not lose sight of the prospect of the imminency of the socialist revolution for this was the very fault that they cast in the teeth of the "advocates of the repartition of land", who (with Stalin) wanted to transfer the land to the private ownership of the peasants. The program of municipalization proved in reality to be

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 322.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 331.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

counter-revolutionary and it is not to be wondered if we consider the fact that it was another manifestation of the essentially unscientific Narodnik romanticism, which had in part descended into liberalism.

It is impossible not to observe that a vulgar materialistic, geographically oriented treatment of the Asiatic mode of production and the questions connected with it are, in the views of Plekhanov's type, just one side of the non-economic handling of social and political questions. For between such "factors" as the geographical factors and the institutions belonging to the superstructure we find real foundation of society: economic and class relations. It is this, the relations of production, that we have to examine — with Marx's many-sided and always historical method — or else we fall into both errors of Plekhanov, contradictory as they might seem.

July 1960

LENIN ON ASIA

Since the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production is once again being discussed, a number of scholars (e.g. Eugene Varga) have discovered that Lenin was conversant with and had never rejected the concept, but it was only Plekhanov's interpretation and application of the category that he disputed. At the same time it is true that in some of Lenin's writings on Asia the word "feudal" crops up without specification, thus creating a basis for an interminable debate between the textualists over the great question whether or not Lenin believed in the applicability of the Marxian concept. This debate would be foolishness for it is evident from the documents of the debate in 1906 on the agrarian program that Lenin was brilliant in applying the Marxian concept, only in his "application" this concept did not turn into a magic word to be used instead of concrete analysis; indeed, Lenin rather omitted the term itself, lest in a Marxian view of Asia Plekhanov's doctrinarianism should get a toehold.

At the same time, Lenin's view of Asia plays an extremely important role — if not in bulk, so much the more in content — in his oeuvre. It was by the drawing in of the "Asiatic question" that such central questions of Lenin's life-work as the theory of imperialism, the peasant problem or that of the world revolution could be propounded and resolved. If we investigate Lenin's views on Asia in order to get a deeper understanding of his oft-quoted sentences, it is from this aspect that we have to approach his dicta.

1900: "Russia concludes the Chinese War", suppressing the revolt of the Chinese and Lenin shows in his article "The War in China" an example of proletarian internationalism, saying bluntly that Russia pursued a plunderous colonial policy. European capitalism had started to carve up China. "They began to rob China as ghouls rob corpses, and when the seeming corpse attempted to resist, they flung themselves upon it like savage beasts, burning down whole villages . . . Poor Imperial Government! So Christianly unselfish, and yet so unjustly maligned! Several years ago it unselfishly seized Port Arthur, and now it has unselfishly flooded the frontier provinces of China with hordes of contractors, engineers, and officers, who, by their conduct, have roused to indignation even the Chinese, known for their docility." It was as if the young Lenin foresaw how the opportunism of the Second International would result in social-chauvinism. "At the present time, the press is conducting a campaign against the Chinese; it is howling about the savage yellow race and its hostility towards civilisation, about Russia's tasks of enlightenment, about the enthusiasm with which the Russian soldiers go into battle, etc., etc. Journalists who crawl on their bellies before the government and the money-bags are straining every nerve to rouse the hatred of the people against China. But the Chinese people have at no

time and in no way oppressed the Russian people. The Chinese people suffer from the same evils as those from which the Russian people suffer — they suffer from an Asiatic government that squeezes taxes from the starving peasantry and that suppresses every aspiration towards liberty by military force; they suffer from the oppression of capital, which has penetrated into the Middle Kingdom.”¹

1904: The year of the Russo-Japanese War for Manchuria and Korea and in his pamphlet titled “To the Russian Proletariat” Lenin states that the war was being waged against an excellently armed people of fifty million, which is fighting for what it considers the essential conditions of national development. He went on to say that it was a despotic and backward government fighting against a politically free and culturally rapidly developing people. Of course, this was not theory but a political comparison of Russia and Japan in a political pamphlet, amongst whose slogans was one extolling Japanese social democracy, which had protested against the war. That the comparison of Russia and Japan (to the disadvantage of the former) was not a fleeting thought can be judged by Lenin’s lines written almost a year later, on the occasion of the capitulation of Port Arthur: “The first thing that strikes the eye is the effect of this event on the trend of the war. The main objective of the Japanese in this war had been attained. Advancing, progressive Asia has dealt backward and reactionary Europe an irreparable blow. Ten years ago this reactionary Europe, with Russia in the lead, was perturbed by the defeat of China at the hands of young Japan, and it united to rob Japan of the best fruits of her victory. Europe was protecting the established relations and privileges of the old world, its prerogative to exploit the Asian peoples—a prerogative held from time immemorial and sanctified by the usage of centuries. The recovery of Port Arthur by Japan is a blow struck at the whole of reactionary Europe.” Even in the “pure” imperialist war Lenin captures the specific relation with extraordinary force: “Its foolish and criminal colonial adventure has landed the autocracy in an impasse, from which the people can extricate themselves only by their own efforts and only at the cost of destroying tsarism.” History has corroborated Lenin’s inference that “never before has the military organisation of a country had such a close bearing on its entire economic and cultural system. The military debacle, therefore, could not but precipitate a profound political crisis. Here again, as so often in history, the war between an advanced and a backward country has played a great revolutionary role.”²

Lenin’s view of Asia is an “orthodox” continuation of the ideas of Marx and Engels. Concerning the revolutionizing of China, Marx wrote the following in 1853: “A most profound yet fantastic speculator on the principles which govern the movements of Humanity, was wont to extol as one of the ruling secrets of nature, what he called the law of the contact of extremes.” Such a “contact of extremes” is, in Marx’s judgement, the forthcoming influence on Europe of the Chinese revolution. The Chinese revolution was occasioned by the British cannons going off in the opium war: “Complete isolation was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China . . . Now, England having brought about the revolution of China, the question is how that revolution will in time react on England and through England on Europe.

¹ V. I. Lenin: “The War in China”. In: *Collected Works*, vol. 4, pp. 374, 376–377.

² V. I. Lenin: “The Fall of Port Arthur”. In: *Collected Works*, vol. 8, pp. 48, 50–52.

This question is not difficult of solution."³ It can occasion a general commercial and financial crisis which in due time might be conducive to a revolution. Of course, Marx was well aware that the revolutionizing of Asia was of a bourgeois character, and in his letter to Engels on October 8, 1858 he raised the problem that it involved: "We cannot deny that bourgeois society has experienced its sixteenth century a second time — a sixteenth century which will, I hope, sound the death-knell of bourgeois society just as the first one thrust it into existence. The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of a world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon this world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan. The difficult question for us is this: on the continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character. Is it not bound to be crushed in this little corner, considering that in a far greater territory the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant?"⁴

Both the hope and the anxiety of Marx and Engels proved true: on the one hand, America and Asia really prolonged the life of capitalism, on the other hand, however, they reacted and still react upon Europe with a whole series of revolutionizing impulses. As we have seen, it was in connection with the "gendarme of Europe", Russia, that Lenin turned his attention to two distinct types of these "impulses" in the case of the Chinese and the Japanese war. And in accordance with his prediction the Russian revolution of 1905 took place, which on its part again "reacted upon" Asia, opening with this very effect a new chapter in world history.

The Russian revolution raised the questions of the alliance of the proletariat and the peasantry with an irresistible force. Lenin sought with enormous theoretical work to defend the ideological independence of the party of the proletariat on the one hand, and, on the other, to unravel from the Narodnik movement the revolutionary energies of the peasantry. His greatest achievement in this sphere was his revolutionary agrarian program, which seemingly yielded to the slogan of Henry George's petty bourgeois socialism, while in reality it proved to be the only revolutionary agrarian program, the acceptance of which in a decade contributed essentially to the survival of the Soviet régime.⁵

It was in 1907, at the international socialist congress of Stuttgart that Lenin got an opportunity to meet face to face with opportunism in the question of colonial politics. The meeting led him to arrive at momentous conclusions. We can read the following in his report on the congress: "This is not the first time the colonial question has figured at international congresses. Up till now their decisions have always been an unqualified condemnation of bourgeois colonial policy as a policy of plunder and violence. This time, however, the Congress Commission was so composed that op-

³ K. Marx: "Revolution in China and Europe". In: K. Marx and F. Engels: *On Colonialism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959, pp. 9 and 11.

⁴ K. Marx to F. Engels, October 8, 1858, in *Selected Correspondence*, p. III.

⁵ In 1920 Lenin wrote about it as follows: "At the very moment of the October Revolution we entered into an informal but very important (and very successful) political Bloc with the petty-bourgeois peasantry by adopting the *Socialist-Revolutionary* agrarian programme in its entirety without a single alteration..." V. I. Lenin: "Left-Wing Communism — An Infantile Disorder." In: *Collected Works*, vol. 31, p. 72.

portunist elements, headed by Van Kol of Holland, predominated in it. A sentence was inserted in the draft resolution to the effect that the Congress did not in principle condemn all colonial policy, for under socialism colonial policy could play a civilising role. The minority in the Commission . . . vigorously protested against any such idea being entertained. The matter was referred to Congress, where the forces of the two trends were found to be so nearly equal that there was an extremely heated debate."

Even Kautsky rejected in the congressional debate the opportunistic theory of a "socialist colonial policy", and eventually the congress discarded it with a vote of 128 against 108. Concerning the voting, Lenin remarked: "The combined vote of the small nations, which either do not pursue a colonial policy, or which suffer from it, outweighed the vote of nations where even the proletariat has been somewhat infected with the lust of conquest." He continued this train of thought: "This vote on the colonial question is of very great importance. First, it strikingly showed up socialist opportunism, which succumbs to bourgeois blandishments. Secondly, it revealed a negative feature in the European labour movement, one that can do no little harm to the proletarian cause, and for that reason should receive serious attention. Marx frequently quoted a very significant saying of Sismondi. The proletarians of the ancient world, this saying runs, lived at the expense of society; modern society lives at the expense of the proletarians. — The non-propertied, but non-working, class is incapable of overthrowing the exploiters. Only the proletarian class, which maintains the whole of society, can bring about the social revolution. However, as a result of the extensive colonial policy, the European proletarian *partly* finds himself in a position when it is *not* his labour, but the labour of the practically enslaved natives in the colonies, that maintains the whole of society . . . In certain countries this provides the material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism." The struggle against such an infection "is bound to be victorious, since the 'privileged' nations are a diminishing faction of the capitalist nations".⁶

With this Lenin got to the first draft of his theory of imperialism. Insofar as to reject the idea of a "socialist colonial policy" Kautsky too remained faithful to the principles of Marx and Engels. As far back as 1882 Kautsky put the question to Engels himself what the views of the British workers were on colonial policy. Engels replied: "Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general: the same as the bourgeois think. There is no workers' party here, you see, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies. In my opinion the colonies proper, i.e., the countries occupied by a European population — Canada, the Cape, Australia — will all become independent; on the other hand, the countries inhabited by a native population, which are simply subjugated — India, Algeria, the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish possessions — must be taken over for the time being by the proletariat and led as rapidly as possible towards independence. How this process will develop is difficult to say. India will perhaps, indeed very probably, make a revolution and as a proletariat in process of self-emancipation cannot conduct any colonial wars,

⁶ V. I. Lenin: "The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 13, pp. 75-77.

it would have to be allowed to run its course; it would not pass off without all sorts of destruction, of course, but that sort of thing is inseparable from all revolutions. The same might also take place elsewhere, e.g., in Algeria and Egypt, and would certainly be the best thing *for us*. We shall have enough to do at home. Once Europe is reorganised, and North America, that will furnish such colossal power and such an example that the semi-civilised countries will of themselves follow in their wake; economic needs, if anything, will see to that. But as to what social and political phases these countries will then have to pass through before they likewise arrive at socialist organisation, I think we today can advance only rather idle hypotheses. One thing alone is certain: the victorious proletariat can force no blessings of any kind upon any foreign nation without undermining its own victory by so doing. Which of course by no means excludes defensive wars of various kinds.”⁷

Kautsky remained faithful to Engels’ doctrine, yet the time was rapidly approaching when even his orthodoxy was unable to save him from the destiny of the British workers’ leaders and that of revisionism. And about the Kautsky who raved, about “ultra-imperialism”, the revolutionary Lenin could only write in 1915 that “. . . the focal point in the Social-Democratic programme must be that division of nations into oppressor and oppressed which forms the *essence* of imperialism, and is *deceitfully* evaded by the social-chauvinists and Kautsky. This division is not significant from the angle of bourgeois pacifism or the philistine Utopia of peaceful competition among independent nations under capitalism, but it is most significant from the angle of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism”.⁸

Lenin’s writing from which the above quotation comes polemizes at the same time with an ultra-left article by Parabellum (Radek), which rejected the right of nations to free self-determination as a non-proletarian demand by a “leftist” contrasting of democracy and socialism. Lenin points out that from Radek’s range of vision are missing “. . . the East, . . . Asia, Africa, and the colonies, where this movement is a thing of the present and the future. Mention of India, China, Persia, and Egypt will be sufficient”.⁹

In the years of the reaction after the revolution of 1905 Lenin continues to watch Asia. This is what he wrote in 1908: “A powerful impetus to the political awakening of the Asian peoples was given by the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian revolution.”¹⁰ This time, as ever, the method, which he had learned from Marx and Engels, is to observe the struggle of revolution and counterrevolution within the whole of the world system of imperialism. And it is extremely illuminating that in these same hard years when he devoted enormous energies to protecting Bolshevism from ideological and organizational disintegration he wrote his famous articles on Tolstoy, in which he elaborated his formulations on Narodnik socialism and the great ally hidden behind it: revolutionary peasant democracy. And as Tolstoy himself refers to the East, Lenin’s appreciation and critique are valid for Asia as well. He wrote

⁷ F. Engels to K. Kautsky, September 12, 1882, in *Selected Correspondence*, p. 351.

⁸ V. I. Lenin: “The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination”. In: *Collected Works*, vol. 21, p. 409.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 407.

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin: “Events in the Balkans and Persia”. In: *Collected Works*, vol. 15, p. 220.

the following in 1911: "Tolstoi counters the opinion of the 'historians' that progress is 'a general law for mankind' by referring to 'the whole of what is known as the Orient' . . . 'There is no general law of human progress', says Tolstoi, 'and this is proved by the quiescence of the Oriental peoples'. — Tolstoi-ism, in its real historical content, is an ideology of an Oriental, an Asiatic order". Tolstoy's "Eastern" ideology — Lenin went on — is a mirror of the Russian social crisis lasting from 1860 up till 1904. In 1905, however, new revolutionary forces entered the scene in Russia. "And the 1905 events in Russia were followed by analogous events in a number of countries in that very 'Orient' to the 'quiescence' of which Tolstoi referred in 1862. The year 1905 marked the beginning of the end of 'Oriental' quiescence."¹¹

At the same time, the quotation also reveals in what a self-evident manner Lenin applied Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production; he denied the bourgeois doctrine of eternal and absolute stagnation, yet it did not even occur to him to deny the comparative stagnation of Asia — before 1905. In the same year he said at the grave of Paul and Laura Lafargue: "The Russian revolution ushered in an era of democratic revolutions throughout Asia, and 800 million people are now joining in the democratic movement of the whole of the civilised world."¹² And in January 1912 he proposed at the Prague conference of his party that it should hail the Chinese revolution: ". . . the Conference recognises the world-wide importance of the revolutionary struggle of the Chinese people, which is bringing emancipation to Asia and is undermining the rule of the European bourgeoisie. The Conference hails the revolutionary republicans of China, testifies to the profound enthusiasm and complete sympathy with which the proletariat of Russia is following the successes of the revolutionary people of China, and condemns the behaviour of the Russian liberals who are supporting tsarism's policy of conquest."¹³

The thoughts he had developed in connection with the Narodnik movement were fully verified by the Chinese revolution of 1911 and it also occasioned a number of formulations of fundamental importance. On the basis of a programmatic article by Sun Yat-sen, Lenin wrote his article titled "Democracy and Narodism in China", which deserves to be cited in detail. In it, he first of all stated: "A progressive Chinese democrat, he argues exactly like a Russian. His similarity to a Russian Narodnik is so great that it goes as far as a complete identity of fundamental ideas and of many individual expressions." By the comparison Lenin did not eliminate the Chinese peculiarity with the European category but — as he did implicitly in the above-quoted Tolstoy article — he strove to formulate a certain similarity between Russia and Asia as well as a peculiarity setting them apart from Europe. What Lenin examined was the relationship of democratism and Narodism "in modern bourgeois revolutions in Asia". This is what he wrote: "This is one of the most serious questions confronting Russia in the revolutionary epoch which began in 1905. And it confronts not only Russia, but the whole of Asia, as will be seen from the platform of the

¹¹ V. I. Lenin: "Lev Tolstoi and His Epoch". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 17, pp. 50–51.

¹² V. I. Lenin: "Speech Delivered in the Name of the R.S.D.L.P. at the Funeral of Paul and Laura Lafargue". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 17, p. 305.

¹³ V. I. Lenin: "Sixth (Prague) All-Russian Conference of R.S.D.L.P.". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 17, p. 485.

provisional President of the Chinese Republic, particularly when this platform is compared with the revolutionary developments in Russia, Turkey, Persia and China. In very many and very essential respects, Russia is undoubtedly an Asian country and what is more, one of the most benighted, medieval and shamefully backward of Asian countries."¹⁴

The same Lenin, who in the debate on the agrarian program rejected the dogmatic and unhistorical application to Russia and twentieth century Asia of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production did not forget about the important remnant of Asia's past since those are important from the viewpoint of the world revolution. And the same Lenin, who from his earliest writings onwards struggled against the ideology of the Russian Narodniks wrote now about Chinese Narodism in the following way: "Before us is the truly great ideology of a truly great people capable not only of lamenting its age-long slavery and dreaming of liberty and equality, but of *fighting* the age-long oppressors of China." Then he compared the revolutionary democratism of the caretaker president of the "benighted, inert, Asiatic China" with the bourgeois obscurantism of the presidents of "countries of advanced culture" in Europe and America, and went on like this: "Does that mean, then, that the materialist West has hopelessly decayed and that light shines only from the mystic, religious East? No, quite the opposite. It means that the East has definitely taken the Western path, that new *hundreds of millions* of people will from now on share in the struggle for the ideals which the West has already worked out for itself. What has decayed is the Western bourgeoisie, which is already confronted by its grave-digger, the proletariat. But in Asia there is *still* a bourgeoisie capable of championing sincere, military, consistent democracy, a worthy comrade of France's great men of the Enlightenment and great leaders of the close of the eighteenth century. — The chief representative of the chief social bulwark, of this Asian bourgeoisie that is still capable of supporting a historically progressive cause, is the peasant."¹⁵

But the "great ideology" of the democratic revolution as put forward by Sun Yat-sen claimed to be a socialist ideology. "But the Chinese Narodnik combines this ideology of militant democracy, firstly, with socialist dreams, with hopes of China avoiding the capitalist path, of preventing capitalism, and, secondly, with a plan for, and advocacy of, radical agrarian reform. It is these two last ideological and political trends that constitute the element which forms *Narodism* — Narodism in the specific sense of that term, i.e., as distinct from democracy, as a supplement to democracy." Why was Chinese democracy socialistic? Because "... in Europe and America — from which the progressive Chinese, *all* the Chinese who have experienced this upsurge, have borrowed their ideas of liberation — emancipation *from* the bourgeoisie, i.e., socialism, is the immediate task. This is bound to arouse sympathy for socialism among Chinese democrats, and is the source of their *subjective* socialism". Against what kind of social order was the Chinese revolution directed? In Lenin's opinion, against feudalism. "Feudalism was based on the predominance of agriculture and natural economy. The source of the feudal exploitation of the

¹⁴ V. I. Lenin: "Democracy and Narodism in China". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 18, pp. 163–164.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 164–165.

Chinese peasant was his *attachment* to the land in some form. The political exponents of this exploitation were the feudal lords, all together and individually, with the emperor as the head of the whole system."¹⁶

It would be of no use to defend or to discuss this sentence word by word since in the concrete context the word "feudalism" obviously means "pre-capitalism". Moreover, a certain kind of feudalization, notably lordly feudalism — that is the establishment of a semi- or pseudo-feudalism — is indeed an internal tropism of the Asiatic mode of production, thus it would be unreasonable even in the case of Asia to eschew at any means the use of the word with a kind of anti-dogmatic dogmatism. What is desirable is only that the word should have a meaning, and with Lenin it does have a meaning: "pre-capitalist society" within the system of twentieth century imperialism.

Returning to Chinese Narodism, Lenin went on to say: "From the point of view of doctrine, this theory is that of a petty-bourgeois 'socialist' reactionary. For the idea that capitalism can be 'prevented' in China and that a 'social revolution' there will be made easier by the country's backwardness, and so on, is altogether reactionary. And Sun Yat-sen himself, with inimitable, one might say virginal naïveté, smashes his reactionary Narodnik theory by admitting what reality forces him to admit, namely that 'China is on the eve of a gigantic industrial' (i.e., capitalist) 'development'." But was it a reactionary agrarian program that Sun Yat-sen announced with the — from a socialist point of view — reactionary theory? No, just the opposite: "... the transfer of rent to the state, i.e., land nationalisation, by some sort of single tax along Henry George lines. There is absolutely nothing else that is *real* in the 'economic revolution' proposed and advocated by Sun Yat-sen." In other words, the agrarian program of the Chinese Narodniks was identical with the Russian agrarian program proposed by Lenin, and out of economic considerations Lenin did not fear either Russia or even the classically "Asiatic" China from the "Asiatic restoration" thought up by Plekhanov. "The irony of history is that Narodism, under the guise of 'combating capitalism' in agriculture, champions an agrarian programme that, if fully carried out, would mean the *most* rapid development of capitalism in agriculture." It is another question how they would succeed in executing the program. At any rate: "The revolutionary bourgeois democracy, represented by Sun Yat-sen, is correct in seeking ways and means of 'renovating' China through maximum development of the initiative, determination and boldness of the peasant masses in the matter of political and agrarian reforms. — Lastly, the Chinese proletariat will increase as the number of Shanghais increases. It will probably form some kind of Chinese Social-Democratic Labour Party which, while criticising the petty-bourgeois utopias and reactionary views of Sun Yat-sen, will certainly take care to single out, defend and develop the revolutionary-democratic core of his political and agrarian programme."¹⁷

Lenin continued to follow with attention the course of the Chinese revolution. He wrote in 1913 that "... the opportunists had scarcely congratulated themselves on 'social peace' and on the non-necessity of storms under 'democracy' when a new source of great world storms opened up in Asia. The Russian revolution was followed

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 166-169.

by revolutions in Turkey, Persia and China. It is this era of storms and their 'repercussions' in Europe that we are now living. No matter what the fate of the great Chinese Republic, against which various 'civilised' hyenas are now whetting their teeth, no power on earth can restore the old serfdom in Asia or wipe out the heroic democracy of the masses in the Asiatic and semi-Asiatic countries".¹⁸ A few weeks later he wrote that the Chinese people have succeeded in overthrowing the old, medieval system and the government supporting it. A republic had come into being in China, and the *first parliament* had been elected in that Asiatic country which, with all her motionlessness and stagnation, had for such a long time been a provide of pleasure to the Black-Hundreds of all nations. The first Chinese parliament had been elected, and it was convened a few weeks ago. In both houses of parliament, the Kuomintang, in Lenin's words the "radical Narodnik republican party, the party of democracy" obtained a majority. Yet the Chinese reaction is strong, Sun Yat-sen's party had a stiff job to tackle. What does the weakness of the party consist in? asked Lenin and answered: In that it could *not yet sufficiently* draw the *wide masses* of the Chinese people into the revolution. The proletariat of China is still weak and there does not exist a leading class capable of desperately and consciously fighting for the consistent execution of the democratic revolution. The peasantry, which has no leader — because there is no proletariat — is extremely intimidated, passive, ignorant, and indifferent towards politics.

He does not for a moment lose sight of the universal historical perspective. He wrote in "The Awakening of Asia": "Was it so long ago that China was considered typical of the lands that had been standing still for centuries? Today China is a land of seething political activity . . . Following the 1905 movement in Russia, the democratic revolution spread to the whole of Asia . . . World capitalism and the 1905 movement in Russia have finally aroused Asia." And: "The proletariat of the European countries and the young democracy of Asia, fully confident of its strength and with abiding faith in the masses, are advancing" to replace the reactionary European bourgeoisie. "The awakening of Asia and the beginning of the struggle for power by the advanced proletariat of Europe are a symbol of the new phase in world history that began early this century."¹⁹

Under the paradoxical title "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia" he wrote as follows: "Everywhere in Asia a mighty democratic movement is growing, spreading and gaining in strength. The bourgeoisie there is *as yet* siding with the people against reaction. *Hundreds* of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom . . . — All the commanders of Europe, all the European bourgeoisie are *in alliance* with all the forces of reaction and medievalism in China. — But all young Asia, that is, the hundreds of millions of Asian working people, has a reliable ally in the proletariat of all civilised countries."²⁰

World War I turned Lenin's attention to the possibilities of a proletarian revolution in Europe, first of all in Russia. The descent of social democracy into social

¹⁸ V. I. Lenin: "The Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 18, p. 584.

¹⁹ V. I. Lenin: "The Awakening of Asia". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 19, pp. 85-86.

²⁰ V. I. Lenin: "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 19, pp. 99-100.

chauvinism and the multinational character of Russia, which was undergoing a revolutionary ferment, had again brought to the fore the problem of nationalities and the colonial question. In the debate over the self-determination of nations Lenin referred to Engels' letter to Kautsky written in 1880, defending Engels' standpoint on the "forcing blessings of any kind upon any foreign nation", and added: "Just because the proletariat has carried out a social revolution it will not become holy and immune from errors and weaknesses."²¹ Then he proves with the following argumentation that the ensuring of the freedom of oppressed nations to secede is a basic interest of the proletariat: "All nations will arrive at socialism — this is inevitable, but all will do so in not exactly the same way, each will contribute something of its own to some form of democracy, to some variety of the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the varying rate of socialist transformations in the different aspects of social life. There is nothing more primitive from the viewpoint of theory, or more ridiculous from that of practice, than to paint, 'in the name of historical materialism', this aspect of the future in a monotonous grey. The result will be nothing more than Suzdal daubing." It is possible that only a very small part of the oppressed nations will become independent before the world-wide victory of socialism, yet "even in that event we would be correct, both from the theoretical and practical political standpoint, in advising the workers, already now, not to permit into their Social-Democratic parties those socialists of the oppressor nations who do not recognise and do not advocate freedom of secession for *all* oppressed nations. For the fact is that we do not know, and cannot know, how many of the oppressed nations will in practice require secession in order to contribute something of their own to the different *forms* of democracy, the different *forms* of transition to socialism."²²

In the same writing, he established the formulation — valid to our own days — of the alliance of socialism and democracy based on the law of the uneven development of capitalism, which is at the same time a characterization of the process, much more advanced since then, of the world revolution: "The social revolution can come only in the form of an epoch in which are combined civil war by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie in the advanced countries and a *whole series* of democratic and revolutionary movements, including the national liberation movement, in the undeveloped, backward and oppressed nations."²³

And in Russia the "ten days that shook the world" came. There were counter-revolutions and foreign intervention, yet the first proletarian state kept its ground. Following its example, Europe was in ferment and the moment of the proletarian revolution seemed at hand, at least in Germany and Austria. The Hungarian Republic of Councils was suppressed and again Lenin turned from "retrograde Europe" to "progressive Asia". He said in his speech on November 22, 1919, at the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East that "... the socialist revolution will not be solely or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against their bourgeoisie — no, it will be a

²¹ V. I. Lenin: "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 22, p. 353.

²² V. I. Lenin: "A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 23, pp. 69-70.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

struggle of all the imperialist-oppressed colonies and countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism . . . That majority which up till then had been completely outside the orbit of historical progress, because it could not constitute an independent revolutionary force, ceased, as we know, to play a passive role at the beginning of the twentieth century . . . The period of the awakening of the East in the contemporary revolution is being succeeded by a period in which all the Eastern peoples will participate in deciding the destiny of the whole world . . . — That is why I think in the history of the development of the world revolution — which, judging by its beginning, will continue for many years and will demand much effort — that in the revolutionary struggle, in the revolutionary movement you will be called upon to play a big part and to merge with our struggle against international imperialism . . . — Most of the Eastern peoples are in a worse position than the most backward country in Europe — Russia. But in our struggle against feudal survivals and capitalism, we succeeded in uniting the peasants and workers of Russia . . . Here contact with the peoples of the East is particularly important, because the majority of the Eastern peoples are . . . not workers . . . The Russian revolution showed how the proletariat, after defeating capitalism and uniting with the vast diffuse mass of working peasants, rose up victoriously against medieval oppression. Our Soviet Republic must now muster all the awakening peoples of the East and, together with them, wage a struggle against international imperialism". The eastern communists were up against an enormous task: to apply Marxism to peasant conditions. "You must find specific forms for this alliance of the foremost proletarians of the world with the labouring and exploited masses of the East whose conditions are in many cases medieval. We have accomplished on a small scale on our country what you will do on a big scale and in big countries . . . — It is self-evident that final victory can be won only by the proletariat of all the advanced countries of the world and we, the Russians, are beginning the work which the British, French or German proletariat will consolidate. But we see that they will not be victorious without the aid of the working people of all the oppressed colonial nations, first and foremost, of Eastern nations . . . You will have to base yourselves on the bourgeois nationalism which is awakening, and must awaken, among those peoples, and which has its historical justification."²⁴

The Russian proletariat was left to itself in Europe, and it was natural that the communists, worrying about the future of the Soviet régime, and also on account of the geographically-historically "semi-Asiatic" character of Russia, turned with mounting interest towards the East. At the Second Congress of the Communist International, the Indian M. N. Roy put forward the alluringly one-sided, simplified view that the centre of the world revolution had been transferred to Asia, and that the fate of the Western proletarian revolution now depended on the East. Lenin regarded it as an exaggeration.²⁵ In his congressional thesis outline on the problem of nationalities and the colonial question he pointed out the tasks of the communists in the following words: "With regard to the more backward states and nations,

²⁴ V. I. Lenin: "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 30, pp. 159-162.

²⁵ Cf. Stuart Schram-Hélène Carrère d'Encausse: *Le marxisme et l'Asie 1853-1964*, Armand Colin, Paris 1965, pp. 197-200.

in which feudal or patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate, it is particularly important to bear in mind: first . . . to assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement . . .; second, . . . struggle against . . . reactionary . . . elements . . .; third, the need to combat Pan-Islamism and similar trends . . .; fourth, the need, in backward countries, to give special support to the peasant movement against the landowners, against landed proprietorship, and against all manifestations or survivals of feudalism, and to strive to lend the peasant movement the most revolutionary character by establishing the closest possible alliance between the West-European communist proletariat and the revolutionary peasant movement in the East, in the colonies, and in the backward countries generally. It is particularly necessary to exert every effort to apply the basic principles of the Soviet system in countries, where pre-capitalist relations pre-dominate — by setting up ‘working people’s Soviets’, etc.; fifth, the need for determined struggle against attempts to give a communist colouring to bourgeois-democratic liberation trends . . . The Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it, and should under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if it is in its most embryonic form . . .; sixth, the need . . . to expose... the deception systematically practised by the imperialist powers, which, under the guise of politically independent states, set up states that are wholly dependent upon them economically, financially and militarily. Under present-day international conditions there is no salvation for dependent and weak nations except in a union of Soviet republics.”²⁶

What Lenin had captured in its germ with this latter argument is something that did not develop fully until after World War II, i.e. the method of neocolonialism. His sentence — valid to this day — on the role of the Soviet Union as a base is illuminating when contrasted with Roy’s “Asia-centrism”. At the same time, a kind of “Europe-centrism” is also foreign to Lenin. This is what we read in the following section of his draft: “The age-old oppression of colonial and weak nationalities by the imperialist powers has not only filled the working masses of the oppressed countries with animosity towards the oppressor nations, but has also aroused distrust in these nations in general, even in their proletariat.” The social chauvinists have only increased that suspicion. “On the other hand, the more backward the country, the stronger is the hold of small-scale agricultural production, patriarchalism and isolation, which inevitably lend particular strength and tenacity to the deepest of petty-bourgeois prejudices, i.e., to national egoism and national narrow-mindedness. These prejudices are bound to die out very slowly, for they can disappear only after imperialism and capitalism have disappeared in the advanced countries, and after the entire foundation of the backward countries’ economic life has radically changed. It is therefore the duty of the class-conscious communist proletariat of all countries to regard with particular caution and attention the survivals of national sentiments in the countries and among nationalities which have been oppressed the longest; it is equally necessary to make certain concessions with a view to more

²⁶ V. I. Lenin: “Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions”. In: *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 149-150.

rapidly overcoming this distrust and these prejudices. Complete victory over capitalism cannot be won unless the proletariat and, following it, the mass of working people in all countries and nations throughout the world voluntarily strive for alliance and unity."²⁷

Even when he was already ill and thus somewhat removed from the minor, daily problems of the Soviet state, Lenin concentrated even more on the universal historical perspective. Hence the astonishing intellectual force and foresight of the notes and articles dictated in the last weeks of his life. And for the same reason it is from the universal historical perspective that he was able to pick out from the ostensibly insignificant, daily trifles that was of fundamental importance. That is why he started his notes dictated in connection with the "autonomization" and the Orjonikidze-incident in Georgia with the following words: "I suppose I have been very remiss with respect to the workers of Russia for not having intervened energetically and decisively enough in the notorious question of autonomisation . . ." Why did Lenin reproach himself? Because in the Caucasus, Orjonikidze committed an assault against citizens of other nationalities, and Lenin felt that his comrades would rather solve the most delicate questions with unconscionable precipitation. He quoted an earlier argument of his on how a distinction has to be drawn between the nationalisms of the oppressor and of the oppressed, large and small nations, and how proletarian internationalism requires of the large nation the compensation of the "inequality which obtains in actual practice". We have to exercise care in solving the nationality question, Lenin continued and, if it is necessary, "take a step backward" temporarily, "i.e. retain the union of Soviet socialist republics only for military and diplomatic affairs, and in all other respects restore the full independence to the individual People's Commissariats". The decentralization of the commissariats, as Lenin sees it, "can be compensated sufficiently by Party authority"; "... the harm that can result to our state from a lack of unification between the national apparatus and the Russian apparatus is infinitely less than that which will be done not only to us, but to the whole International, and to the hundreds of millions of the peoples of Asia, which is destined to follow us on to the stage of history in the near future. It would be unpardonable opportunism, if, on the eve of the debut of the East, just as it is awakening, we undermined our prestige with its peoples, even if only by the slightest crudity or injustice towards our own non-Russian nationalities. The need to rally against the imperialists of the West, who are defending the capitalist world, is one thing. There can be no doubt about that . . . It is another thing when we ourselves lapse, even if only in trifles, into imperialist attitudes towards oppressed nationalities, thus undermining all our principled sincerity, all our principled defence of the struggle against imperialism. But the morrow of world history will be a day when the awakening peoples oppressed by imperialism are finally aroused and the decisive long and hard struggle for their liberation begins".²⁸

Lenin's "Our Revolution" is also alive with world-history, when he states about the pseudo-Marxists of the Second International that they have not understood the essence, the revolutionary dialectics of Marxism. "They have even absolutely

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 150-151.

²⁸ V. I. Lenin: "The Question of Nationalities or Autonomisation". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 36, pp. 605-611.

failed to understand Marx's plain statements that in times of revolution the utmost flexibility is demanded, and have even failed to notice, for instance, the statements Marx made in his letters — I think it was in 1856 — expressing the hope of combining a peasant war in Germany, which might create a revolutionary situation, with the working-class movement . . . For instance, it does not even occur to them that because Russia stands on the borderline between the civilised countries and the countries which this war has for the first time definitely brought into the orbit of civilisation — all the Oriental, non-European countries — she could and was, indeed, bound to reveal certain distinguishing features; although these, of course, are in keeping with the general line of world development, they distinguish her revolution from those which took place in the West-European countries and introduce certain partial innovations as the revolution moves on the countries of the East." What happened is that the situation that arose with the imperialist World War and "... the revolutions maturing or partly already begun in the East, gave rise to circumstances that put Russia and her development in a position which enabled us to achieve precisely that combination of a 'peasant war' with the working-class movement suggested by no less a Marxist than Marx himself". And finally: "Our European philistines never even dream that the subsequent revolutions in the Oriental countries, which possess much vaster populations and a much vaster diversity of social conditions, will undoubtedly display even greater distinctions than the Russian revolution."²⁹

And in his last article, "Better Fewer, but Better", Lenin again rooted the most practical proposal in the universal historical perspective. He wrote that although Western European imperialism was unable to overthrow the Soviet régime in Russia it yet succeeded in throwing difficulties in the way of its development toward socialism. The victorious powers were in a position to make certain concessions to their "oppressed classes" and thereby to retard the revolution. "At the same time, as a result of the last imperialist war, a number of countries of the East, India, China, etc., have been completely jolted out of the rut. Their development has definitely shifted to general European capitalist lines. The general European ferment has begun to affect them, and it is now clear to the whole world that they have been drawn into a process of development that must lead to a crisis in the whole of world capitalism." Can the Soviet régime in Russia survive until the Western European revolution? "Can we save ourselves from the impending conflict with these imperialist countries? May we hope that the internal antagonisms and conflicts between the thriving imperialist countries of the West and the thriving imperialist countries of the East will give us a second respite as they did the first time, when the campaign of the West-European counter-revolution in support of the Russian counter-revolution broke down owing to the antagonism in the camp of the counter-revolutionaries of the West and the East, in the camp of the Eastern and the Western exploiters, in the camp of Japan and the USA?" The answer depended on a number of circumstances, but: "In the last analysis, the outcome of the struggle will be determined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., account for the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe. And during the past few years it is this majority that

²⁹ V. I. Lenin: "Our Revolution". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 33, pp. 476-480.

has been drawn into the struggle for emancipation with extraordinary rapidity, so that in this respect there cannot be the slightest doubt what the final outcome of the world struggle will be. In this sense, the complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured." Yet the unavoidability of the world-wide victory of socialism is not a guarantee of the survival of the Soviet régime. What is to be done? "To ensure our existence until the next military conflict between the counter-revolutionary imperialist West and the revolutionary and nationalist East, between the most civilised countries of the world and the Orientally backward countries which, however, comprise the majority, this majority must become civilised. We, too, lack enough civilisation to enable us to pass straight on to socialism, although we do have the political requisites for it." Then Lenin turned to the "tactics" to be followed, and industrialization, and referred back to his practical organizational proposals.³⁰

As we see, Lenin's views on Asia constitute a pillar of his theory of imperialism and world revolution. They do not mean the continuation of Marx's *theory of history*; the draft of this being in *The German Ideology* and the *Grundrisse*, which Lenin could not have been acquainted with. In accordance with the general tendency of his oeuvre, Lenin continues directly the revolutionary theory of Marx and Engels, even in regard to Asia. In this sense his views have not only a political but also a "historico-philosophical" character, yet they are not historico-theoretical. At the same time, they in no way contradict Marx's theory on the Asiatic mode of production, but, on the contrary, continuing the political theory of Marx and Engels, they are indirectly based on it.

It would be very instructive to examine to what extent Lenin's brilliant conjectures and predictions, statements and slogans have or have not come true or have not yet come true in the course of the almost half a century that has elapsed since his death. One thing is sure: socialism is today already a world system, which is even more difficult to crush than the "isolated" Soviet Union. To confront Lenin's words directly with contemporary reality would be a doctrinarian mind-game. Such an "actualization" of our collection of quotations would promise nothing from a scientific point of view; and if we take the said task seriously a whole series of studies would first have to analyse the historical changes of the past half a century. In a Marxian approach to the Asia problem of today, Lenin can only help us if we look behind his words and heed his "orthodox", revolutionary, dialectical method.

March 1970

³⁰ V. I. Lenin: "Better Fewer, but Better." In: *Collected Works*, vol. 33, pp. 499-501.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE NEW DEBATE ON THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

Ever since the Marxian category of the Asiatic mode of production was branded by the "resolutions" of the Leningrad debate of 1931 as anti-Marxist, Marxist historical scholarship could only apply it with the utmost caution. The term itself has been entirely ousted from the philosophical theory of history; at the same time, Oriental research of a Marxian character started to develop rapidly, the results of which exerted more and more pressure on the too narrow and at the same time inadmissibly wide bounds of the lifeless historico-philosophical patterns. As a result of the development of oriental research, the more painstaking Marxist scholars sought to use as much as possible from Marx's theory of Asia without writing down the category as such.¹ This, however, inevitably led to theoretical limitations, which, of course, had an unfavourable influence on concrete specialized research as well. Theoretical research, becoming more lively in the wake of the 20th congress of the CPSU, set about removing the dogmatic limitations and from the late fifties onward independent efforts were made in several countries to save from oblivion, rehabilitate, re-interpret, and enrich the Marxian theory of the Asiatic mode of production.² It was from the mid-fifties onward that I became especially interested in the Marxian view of Asia, approaching it from the aspect of the specialized field of sinology. When I understood that the reason why even its "partisans" interpreted dogmatically the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production (fourth "basic" pre-capitalist formation) is that they could not have been acquainted with the *Grundrisse* and that it is on the basis of the historico-theoretical draft of the *Grundrisse* that the Marxian concept can be interpreted fully, I committed to paper an interpretation and was sincerely surprised to see that in the life of philosophy, convalescing from the illness of dogmatism, this realization was taken for a kind of discovery. In 1962, at the invitation of French Marxists, I was afforded an opportunity to present this interpretation in a lecture before a small collective of the Marxist Study and Research Centre in Paris; later my writings were made accessible to a wide circle, and thus perhaps it is not without reason that I feel as having a share in reviving world-wide interest in the Marxian concept.³

Thus, on the one hand, the book written in 1960 on the concept of the Asiatic mode of production was part of an international effort aimed at removing the shackles of dogmatism. However, the direct occasion for writing it was the circumstance that an erstwhile "partisan" of the category of the Asiatic mode of production,

¹ Cf. A. B. Ranovich's work, e.g. his *Ellinizm i ego istoricheskaya rol'* (Hellenism and its Historical Role), Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, Moscow-Leningrad 1950.

² See Jean Chesneaux's bibliography in *La Pensée*, April 1964, pp. 67-73.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 35, 45-46 sqq.

Karl A. Wittfogel, wrote in 1957 a bulky volume entitled *Oriental Despotism* containing his recent views on Eastern societies, communism, and many other things.⁴ Wittfogel once professed to be a Marxist and he made his mark with Chinese economic and socio-historical writings, in which he experimented with interpreting the Marxian concept of the Asiatic mode of production on the basis of Plekhanov. In his new book he openly disclaimed Marxism and — to crown Plekhanov's geographism — he pronounced every social formation which ventures to differ from the Athenian polis and the "American way of life" to be a "hydraulic" society. The book reflects the utter bankruptcy of Wittfogel's scholarship and it would be superfluous to waste words on a detailed critique, but in its ninth chapter, under the title "The rise and fall of the theory of the Asiatic mode of production", Wittfogel tries to prove with philological meticulousness that Marx and Engels, who — according to him — have "drawn" the concept of "Asiatic society", of the Asiatic mode of production, from British political economy, discarded it when Bakunin turned against "state socialism". According to him Lenin acted in the same way: first he advocated it and later rejected it until finally Stalin removed the concept once for all, and in fact this latter procedure is the truest to the "etatist" spirit of Marxism because with the recognition of the fact of the Asiatic "etatism" the "Asiatic" character of communism could also be gradually exposed.⁵ With his "micro-philological" tricks and with the arbitrary quotation of minor words instead of the total context he has undoubtedly created, and still does, a certain confusion amongst Marxists, who, unfortunately, got to know the relevant formulations of Marx, Engels, and Lenin for the most part in the arrangement and interpretations of the renegades of Marxism. It is this circumstance that made (and makes) it necessary that in the present writing first of all Marx himself should speak, sometimes at length — even if primitive people seek to slight Marx's authentic thoughts by the fashionable charge of "citatology". Today — after the decades of the "dual power" of dogmatism and revisionism — the sole basis and starting-point of the further development of Marxism is an "orthodox" restoration, in the same way as it was in Lenin's time.

It was for the same reason that I said in Paris that it was time to "take back" Marx's concept from the hands of the revisionists and falsifiers of the Wittfogel type.⁶ This seem to have been taken hard by Wittfogel because at the International Orientalist Congress of 1967 (Ann Arbor, Michigan) he retorted: "The ideological forces that for decades avoided these views in part or altogether, display a rare sense of humor when they denounce as falsifiers those who throughout all these years have been reproducing Marx's 'Asiatic' ideas. The Hungarian sinologist, F. Tőkei, opened the Paris 'Debate' in 1962 by accusing me of having (like an evil Prometheus) taken from him and his comrades Marx's wonderfully rich concept."⁷ As for Wittfogel's

⁴ K. A. Wittfogel: *Oriental Despotism, A Comparative Study of Total Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1957. Page references are to the 1967 New Haven-London paperback edition.

⁵ Cf. *Op. cit.*, pp. 369-412.

⁶ Cf. *La Pensée*, April 1964, pp. 35 and 37.

⁷ K. A. Wittfogel: "Results and Problems of the Study of Oriental Despotism", *Journal of Asian Studies*, No. 2, 1969, vol. XXVIII, pp. 358-359.

humour, it is rather marred by remorse, as though the world-famous monopolist of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production now wished for no more than the recognition that vis-à-vis vulgar-Marxism he had adhered to Marx's term. Thus the Hungarian sinologist can note that that particular "taking back" has taken place after all. As for Wittfogel's second sentence, I have never said nor ever thought that Wittfogel has "stolen" the Marxian concept, but to the contrary, I am well aware that, together with several other thoughts of Marx, this concept too was *presented* to Wittfogel, and there are few things that I have decided on more resolutely than to never again take part in such a giveaway of the treasures of Marxism (and science in general).

Wittfogel, however, thinks that he still possesses the decisive weapon to prove his point. This is how he continued his lecture: "But this concept is still a threat. As just stated, the participants in the present debate are still haunted by some aspects of the concept that the Leningrad discussants declared inadmissible. In addition, *Oriental Despotism* pointed to an enormously explosive issue that was shunned in the 1931 discussion — Marx' interpretation of Tsarist Russia as a variant of Oriental despotism and Lenin's attitude toward this interpretation."⁸ And Wittfogel tries to prove that Marx and Engels, as well as the young Lenin, had included Russia in the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, which, however, is denied by Marxists. As this objection can be heard from other quarters⁹ as well, and as this point of controversy is generally considered to be the neuralgic point of Marxists, it is worthwhile to pay some attention to the question.

Wittfogel thinks that it proves his own opinion that in 1853 Engels pronounced Russia to be "semi-Asiatic", that Marx in the same year referred to Russia as "semi-Oriental" and to China as "entirely Oriental", while in 1855 Engels spoke about Muscovite "Russo-Mongolian barbarism"; that according to a term Marx used in 1857 the Mongolian conquest "Tartarized" Moscow; that in 1875 and 1876 Engels reckoned the line of "Oriental despotism" based upon village communities "as from India to Russia"; and finally, that in 1881, in the drafts of his letter of reply to Vera Zasulich Marx likewise wrote about the "central despotism" coming into being above the village communities.¹⁰ From amongst the insignificant occurrences of words, sometimes merely indicative of a simple geographical fact, it is undoubtedly worthwhile to point out a series of articles by Marx, written in 1856–1857, the *Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century*, which was published in book form in 1899.¹¹ This is indeed an interesting and important document of Marx's knowledge and historical views — even though not in the way Wittfogel thinks. In the fifth article Marx states about the policy of the first Ruriks: "It was nothing more nor less than the policy of the German barbarians inundating Europe — the history of the modern nations beginning only after the deluge has passed away. The Gothic period of Russia in particular forms but a chapter of the Norman con-

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cf. Stuart Schram-Hélène Carrère d'Encausse: *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁰ Cf. also K. A. Wittfogel: "The Marxist View of Russian Society and Revolution", *World Politics*, No. 4, July 1960, vol. XII, pp. 489–493.

¹¹ K. Marx: *Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century*. Edited by his daughter, Eleanor Marx Avling, London 1899.

quests. As the empire of Charlemagne precedes the foundation of modern France, Germany, and Italy, so the empire of the Ruriks precedes the foundation of Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic Settlements, Turkey and Muscovy itself." Whoever has an idea of Marx's way of thinking will immediately see that he sets the problem of the old Russia into the historical Middle Ages, and it is only from there that he takes his analogies. He characterizes the "primitive organisation" of the Norman conquerors as "vassalship without fiefs, of fiefs consisting only in tributes". And later on: "Warfare and organisation of conquest on the part of the first Ruriks differ in no point from those of the Normans in the rest of Europe." In Marx's opinion the empire of the Ruriks was of an "exclusively Gothic character" and it was only Novgorod that he considered to be a "Slavonian State". With the breaking of the Norman supremacy this empire disintegrated, torn apart by "feudal wars". "Thus, the Russia of the Normans completely disappears from the stage, and the few weak reminiscences in which it still outlived itself, dissolve before the terrible apparition of Genghis Khan. The bloody mire of Mongolian slavery, not the rude glory of the Norman epoch, forms the cradle of Muscovy, and modern Russia is but a metamorphosis of Muscovy."¹²

In what follows, the fifth article treats of the gradual rise of Muscovy and the fall of Mongolian power, concentrating on the political aspect of the events. The sixth article adverts to the policy of Peter the Great, and outlines the nature of the change meant by the turning from the East towards the West. "By the transfer of the capital, Peter proclaimed that he . . . intended working on the east and the immediately neighbouring countries through the agency of the west. If the agency through the east was narrowly circumscribed by the stationary character and the limited relations of Asiatic peoples, the agency through the west became at once illimited and universal from the movable character and the all-sided relations of Western Europe." And the following sentence fits into this context: "If the Muscovite Czars, who worked their encroachments by the agency principally of the Tartar Khans, were obliged to *tartarize* Muscovy, Peter the Great, who resolved upon working through the agency of the west, was obliged to *civilize* Russia."¹³

That the Mongolian rule had significantly retarded the development of Russia, tainting it with a touch of "Asia", cannot be denied. The village community as the foundation of the despotic form of government was mentioned by Marx and Engels several times even in connection with Russia. The real question, however, was the structure of the community of land as formed in the course of history. In the first draft of the letter in reply to Vera Zasulich Marx wrote: "There is one feature of the 'land commune' in Russia, which constitutes its weakness and is detrimental to it in all respects. This is its isolation, the lack of contact between the life of one commune and that of the others, this *localised microcosm* which is not found everywhere as inherent feature of this type, but wherever it is present has given rise to a more or less centralised despotism over the communes. The unification of northern Russian republics proves that this isolation, which would seem to have been originally dictated by the vast expanse of territory, was to a large extent consolidated by the political

¹² *Op. cit.*, pp. 74-77.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 86-89.

events which Russia went through after the invasion of the Mongols."¹⁴ Marx's remark refers back directly to his lines written more than twenty years before. It deserves attention that he accounts for the isolation of the Russian "agricultural communities" merely by the immensity of the territory and the Mongolian invasion. It was the historical environment that did not allow the Russian agricultural community to disintegrate, or to be more precise, renewed it over and over again. Besides, in the drafts of his letter Marx worked on a historical typology of agricultural communities, and it is worth-while to get acquainted with his attempt as the Marxist interpretation of both the Russian communities and the structure and dynamics of these communities in general. We read the following in the third draft: "The primitive communities are not made after the same pattern. On the contrary, their sum total constitutes a series of social associations differing both in type and age, which stand for different stages of development. One of these types, which is customarily referred to as the *agricultural community*, is the type of the *Russian community* as well. Its western equivalent is the *Germanic community*, which is a product of recent times. It did not yet exist in the days of Julius Caesar, and had already ceased to exist when the Germanic tribes set about conquering Italy, Gaul, Hispania etc. In the age of Julius Caesar arable land was already yearly divided between different groups, the *gentes* and the *tribes*, but not yet between the individual families of a particular community; probably the cultivation too was made according to groups, jointly. On the Germanic land itself this somewhat archaic type of community has changed, through natural development, into an *agricultural community*, as Tacitus records it. After Tacitus' age we lose sight of it. Amidst the incessant wars and migrations it decayed under mysterious circumstances; perhaps it died a violent death. Yet its natural vitality is proved by two incontestable facts. A few sporadic specimens of this model have survived all the vicissitudes of the Middle Ages and have been preserved down to our own days, in my own native land for example, the district of Trier. Yet what is even more important, its impression is so well distinguishable from the community, that has arisen out of it, that by unriddling the latter Maurer was able to reconstruct the former. The new community, in which the cultivable land belongs to the cultivators as *private property*, whereas the forests, pastures, fallow grounds etc. remain in *co-ownership*, has been introduced by the Germans in all occupied countries. As a result of the characteristics drawn from the prototype this community became the sole home of popular freedom and popular life throughout the Middle Ages. — The 'community of land' is to be encountered in Asia as well, amongst the Afghans etc., yet everywhere it appears as the *newest type* and practically the last word of the *archaic formation* of societies. It was in order to emphasize this fact that I expatiated upon a few details with reference to the Germanic community."¹⁵

Three historical types of the agricultural communities unfold before us: the "archaic", the "Germanic" (or "Russian"), and the "new community" that the Germans introduced in the occupied territories. Marx distinguished the second type

¹⁴ K. Marx: First draft of the reply to V. I. Zasulich. In: *Selected Works*, vol. III, p. 157.

¹⁵ Marx wrote to Zasulich in French. For the original version, see: *Lettre de Karl Marx à Vera Zasulich* (1881), troisième brouillon. *Sur les sociétés pré-capitalistes*. Textes choisis de Marx, Engels, Lénine. Editions Sociales, Paris 1970, pp. 336–337.

from the first according to the following viewpoints: 1. The second, as distinct from the first, is founded not on consanguinity between its members but is "the first social association of free men". 2. In the second type the house and the courtyard pertaining to it already belong to the cultivator "as a private individual". 3. In the second type the inalienable cultivable land, which has remained in co-ownership, is already cultivated not jointly but according to families, within the framework of a periodical redistribution, yet appropriating its produce "as a private individual". "Understandably", Marx continued, "the constitutional *duality* of the agricultural community lends it great vitality. Having shaken off the strong but restricted bonds of consanguinity, the co-ownership of land and the social relations arising out of it ensure it a stable foundation, while at the same time the house and the courtyard, which are the exclusive acreage of the individual family, allotment cultivation and the private appropriation of its produce give such an upswing to the personality as is incompatible with the machinery of the more primitive communities."¹⁶ Obviously, the first type belongs to the category of primitive society, the second *could* mean a transition to class societies, while the third belongs undoubtedly to the history of European feudalism. Concerning the second, transitional type, we have tried earlier on to prove that it did not only mean a historical transition to the "new community" introduced by the Germans but it was also, as it were, a prototype, prefiguration, and germ of the Greek *polis*; only whereas the "new community" brought its private ownership element to absolute ascendancy over the collective element, the community constituting the archetype of the *polis* reconciles in a peculiar form the private ownership and the collective element, making them proportionate and indissoluble from one another.¹⁷ Thus the "constitutional duality" or the second type was a universal historical starting-point, firstly, of the development of antiquity, and, secondly, of the coming into being of European feudalism. Of course, even these two universal historical formations can constitute a line of development, which unfolds even in the basic cells, for the reason why the "new community" introduced by the Germans could come about from the second type of community is obviously that the second type brought with them from the Germans proved unsuitable for any kind of organization of the Roman Empire's stable private landownership. The type of the "new community" could never have come about had it not been for the private-ownership-in-land foundation laid down and stabilized in the centuries of the European antiquity. That in this respect the historically decisive factor was the Western European development is best evidenced by the vegetation for a thousand years in Eastern Europe of precisely the "Russian community", that is, the second type, whose historical environment enabled "Asia" to retard, side-track, or deadlock development over and over again.

Concerning this we can read in Marx's draft that "... it is no less evident that this self-same duality might, in the course of time, become the germ of disintegration. Apart from all deleterious effects coming from outside, the community carries in its womb the elements of destruction. It has already been infiltrated into by the private

¹⁶ Cf. *Op. cit.*, pp. 337-338.

¹⁷ Cf. F. Tökei: *Antikvitás és feudalizmus* (Antiquity and Feudalism), Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1969, pp. 69-70, 101-108.

estate in the form of a house and a village courtyard, and this might turn into a stronghold from which to prepare the assault against the common land. We have already seen such a thing happen. But the crux of the matter is work on allotment-grounds as a source of private appropriation. This gives scope for the accumulation of things personal, e.g. livestock, money, indeed, sometimes of slaves or serfs. This movable property, which the community cannot control, and which is the object of personal exchanges, where cunning and chance are given a clear field, weighs more and more heavily on the whole village economy. This tends to dissolve the primitive economic and social equality. It brings in heterogeneous elements, which within the pale of the community give rise to conflicts of interest and conflicting passions, capable of undermining the co-ownership first of arable lands and later of forests, pastures, fallow-grounds etc., which — once they have turned into the *communal appendages* of private ownership — will in due time become the portions of private ownership. — As the last phase of the primitive formation of society the agricultural community is at the same time a transitional phase to the second formation, that is, a transition from a society founded on co-ownership to a society founded on private ownership. Of course, the second formation embraces the range of societies founded on slavery and serfdom. — But does this mean that the historical career of the agricultural community must inevitably be conducive to this outcome? Not at all. Its innate duality affords an alternative: its ownership element will gain the upperhand over its collective element or the latter will gain the upperhand over the former. Everything depends on the historical environment surrounding the community".¹⁸

On the basis of all this, while characterizing the society of Russia, we must not by any means start from the doctrinaire assumption that Moscow had introduced the Asiatic mode of production on the Chinese-Mongolian model. This, of course, is a fact from a certain point of view, yet the Marxian approach has to locate the problem first of all in an international context. And from the viewpoint of world history the basic fact is that the Russian development started as a part of the European development, in reciprocal action with the European antiquity, in the direction of feudalism. And since to Russia antiquity is meant rather by its Oriental, Byzantine form, the exploration of the peculiarities of the Russian development starts, from a scientific point of view, with the question as to what extent was Byzantium the survival of antiquity, to what extent it started on the way of feudalism and to what extent it "returned" at times to the Asiatic-bureaucratic tax economy. At the present state of investigations, a detailed analysis is not yet feasible and I cannot offer any kind of hypothesis. From a theoretical point of view, however, it is unquestionable that Byzantium — although, from a certain point of view, an autolytic product of antiquity — had never developed classical Western European feudalism, indeed, had not been able to take it over entirely from Western Europe. In the whole of Eastern Europe and in Asia, indeed, in Egypt, it was of decisive importance that in the eastern territories of the Roman Empire the conquest was not as thorough as in the West: it did not destroy the immemorial Asiatic mode of production but assimilated it as a whole in the dual economic-proprietary form of the antiquity and practically accepted it as a

¹⁸ K. Marx to V. Zasulich, in: *Op. cit.*, p. 338.

supplement of the *state* sector of the antique structure.¹⁹ Thus the mode of production of the ancient East had survived with lesser or greater changes, or rather, we should say that it weathered the ancient world successfully enough for the ancient-eastern type of the Asiatic mode of production, the bureaucratic tax economy, and despotism to be organized on its basis even in the Middle Ages of world history, indeed, this Asiatic foundation with its isolated village communities did not permit of any other economic and social formation to be organized. Such a revival of Asia has been made by the Persians for example, then the Arabs and the Turks as well. Granted this, after the fall of Byzantium Muscovite Russia, as it is well known, regarded herself the "third Rome" and, until Peter the Great effected a radical change in politics, she communicated with such — and even more archaic — Asian societies.

Moreover, Russia came under the Mongolian yoke. The problem of the Mongolians and of "Tartarization" again demands another approach. Firstly, the bigstock-breeding nomadism of the plains, the so-called "nomadic feudalism" came into existence in the proximity of classical agricultural civilizations (China, India, etc.) and thus it is a product — and a parasite — of the Asiatic mode of production as taken in a qualified sense of the word.²⁰ Secondly, at the time of the conquest of Russia the Mongolians had already brought under their dominion a part of China herself, where, relying on ancient traditions, they themselves had brought about a "new" system of the Chinese tax economy and bureaucratism. Thus the "Tartarization" of Moscovy means, to all intents and purposes, a possibly entirely direct reception of "entirely Asiatic" taxing and state organizational methods. But does the reception of such methods mean that the economic-social structure of Moscovy answers the concept of the Asiatic mode of production? It is by no means sure. Only for Wittfogel, who combines Plekhanov's doctrinarianism with Max Weber's sociologism, is this conclusion so simple, for he means only a bureaucracy model by the Marxian Asiatic mode of production: isolated village communities with a central bureaucracy above, which exacts the taxes. What is the most important in Marx's theory, the question of landed property, plays only an ancillary role in Wittfogel's conception. Although it is not on the basis of the model of taxing but on the basis of the character of landed property that the Asiatic and the feudal form of the mode of production — which are ostensibly similar yet in reality contradictory — can be distinguished.

And yet the most important way of theoretically approaching the Russian development is to plot from the beginnings the technological development of the Russian peasantry, the formation of landed property relations, the various forms of the exploitation of peasants and their history, the character of commercial and financial relations, etc. This work is in progress, and has so far been attended by tremendous factual results.²¹ The facts seem to support Marx's theoretical inference that the Russian agricultural community — in spite of the great variety of forms — corresponds essentially to the second type, the transitional dual type, which, mainly as a result of the historical environment, either survives for a long time and becomes the

¹⁹ Cf. A. B. Ranovich: *Vostochnye Provincii Rimskoi Imperii v I—III vv* (The Eastern Provinces of the Roman Empire during the First Three Centuries A.D.). Moscow 1949.

²⁰ Cf. F. Tökei: *Op. cit.*, pp. 18–19.

²¹ Cf. B. D. Grekov: *Die Bauern in der Rus von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum 17. Jahrhundert*, I—II, Berlin 1958–59.

basis of the despotic form of government or, as with the Germans, and earlier on with the Greeks and the Romans, passes into a social form founded on the private ownership in land. This much is sure, that neither the economy of Kievan nor of Muscovite Russia was characterized by the Asiatic mode of production in the specific meaning of the word, for the basis of the classical Asiatic mode of production was originally constituted by the first, "archaic type" of the agricultural community, and although the first type shortly changed into the second this took place already within the structure built upon the first type without effecting any radical change in the former. Undoubtedly, in Kievan Russia a feudal type of development commenced but had not yet unfolded; Marx had appositely compared it with the empire of Charlemagne. The rise of Moscow meant not a new victory of Asia over Europe but the centralization — with the help of the bureaucracy borrowed from Asia — of Russian feudalism strengthening simultaneously with the weakening of the Mongolian régime. It was at that period that Russian society and the Russian state became semi-Asiatic. This being granted, the real question is whether in the Russian mode of production, from the viewpoint of property relations, the "Asiatic" (bureaucratic) or the "European" (feudal) element was the dominant factor. Going back to the agricultural community foundations, the question runs as follows: Did the historical environment of Moscow decide the "alternative" of the second type of the agricultural community in favor of the private ownership or of the "collective" element?

In the debate of the Russian social democrats over the agrarian program Plekhanov contended that in Muscovy the Asiatic mode of production prevailed: "The land, together with its cultivators was held in servitude by the state."²² Lenin was sceptical. He argued: "First of all look at this 'nationalisation in Muscovy before the reign of Peter I'. We will not dwell on the fact that Plekhanov's views on history are an exaggerated version of the liberal-Narodnik view of Muscovy. It is absurd to talk about the land being nationalised in Russia in the period before Peter I, we have only to refer to Klyuchevsky, Yefimenko and other historians. But let us have these excursions into history. Let us assume for a moment that the land was really nationalised in Muscovy before the reign of Peter I in the seventeenth century. What follows from it? According to Plekhanov's logic, it follows that nationalisation would facilitate the restoration of Muscovy. But such logic is sophistry and not logic, it is juggling with words without analysing the economic basis of development, or the economic content of concepts. Insofar as (or if) the land was nationalised in Muscovy, the economic basis of this nationalisation was the *Asiatic mode of production*. But it is the *capitalist mode of production* that became established in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, and is absolutely predominant in the twentieth century. What, then, remains of Plekhanov's argument? He confused nationalisation based on the Asiatic mode of production with nationalisation based on the capitalist mode of production. Because the words are identical he failed to see the fundamental difference in economic, that is, production relations. Although he built up his argument on the restoration of Muscovy (i.e., the alleged restoration of Asiatic mode of production), he actually spoke about political restoration, such as the restoration of the Bourbons

²² V. I. Lenin: "The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905-1907." In: *Collected Works*, vol. 13, p. 326.

(which he mentioned), that is, the restoration of the anti-republican form of government on the basis of capitalist production relations."²³

Lenin's answer is methodologically instructive; even Plekhanov, Weber, and Wittfogel might have profited from it. He does not reject the concept of the Asiatic mode of production in general, but he is sceptical about its applicability with regard to Russia. As we know from several of his works, Lenin regarded the production relations and property relations of old Russia as feudal relations. What he regarded as important, however, was not the evolutionary history of this feudalism but its undeniable existence in the Russia of around the turn of the century, namely its existence chiefly in the form of nobiliary latifundia, that is, of lordly private ownership in land. He recognized the "partly feudal, partly Asiatic" character of even the conditions of his own age; he was aware of the incredible variety of peasant property relations,²⁴ yet he started from the fact that capitalism is able to bring *all kinds* of pre-capitalist conditions under the power of capital, and that at the same time the most revolutionary course of action is to try to make this subjection unfold not in the "Prussian" but in the "American" way.²⁵ He finds the development of capitalism slow in the lordly-feudal sector and more rapid in the "Asiatic"-village-community sector of the Russian economy. Concerning the relationship of the two "sectors" he stated most explicitly that "... the rule of the feudal landlords through the centuries has left its imprint on *all* forms of landownership in the country, on the peasant allotments as well as upon the holdings of the settlers in the relatively free borderlands: the whole colonisation policy of the autocracy is permeated with the Asiatic interference of a hidebound bureaucracy, which hindered the settlers from establishing themselves freely, introduced terrible confusion into the new agrarian relationships, and infected the border regions with the poison of the feudal bureaucracy of central Russia. Not only is landlordism in Russia medieval, but so also is the peasant allotment system. The latter is incredibly complicated. It splits the peasantry up into thousands of small units, medieval groups, social categories. It reflects the age-old history of arrogant interference in the peasants' agrarian relationships both by the central government and the local authorities. It drives the peasants, as into a ghetto, into petty medieval associations of a fiscal, taxlevying nature, into associations for the ownership of allotment land, i.e., into the village communes".²⁶

"The feudal bureaucracy of central Russia" is an accurate expression of the fact that the Russian bureaucracy did not represent an independent economic sector but was entirely subjected to lordly feudalism. Of course, taxing bureaucracy was not characteristic of Western European feudalism and thus the reason why Russian feudalism is "semi-Asiatic" is that it made more extensive use of the state sector than Western European feudalism for the expansion of the private-ownership-in-land sector, for the widening of the foundation of feudal exploitation, and although in

²³ V. I. Lenin: "Report on the Unity Congress of the R.S.D.L.P." In: *Collected Works*, vol. 10, pp. 331-332.

²⁴ Cf. V. I. Lenin: "The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905-1907." In: *Collected Works*, vol. 13, pp. 277-280.

²⁵ Cf. *Op. cit.*, pp. 238-242.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 423-424.

its tendency it subjected to an ever increasing extent the "Asiatic" to the "European", this subjection did not extend to the disorganization of the old, Asiatic, or even antique governmental forms, as in the West, where in the period of the entire maturity of feudalism the statehood of the ancient world was being reduced to the church organization. As in Byzantium, in Russia, too, the secular and the ecclesiastical organization, that is, the private ownership and the "state" sector did not bifurcate in a radical way. As the second, dual structural type of the agricultural community vegetated for centuries so the Russian society and state resting on it kept in a state of vegetation the dual structure of the *antique* mode of production, which balanced the private and the public sector. In the last analysis the Russian mode of production revealed itself as a "transitional" type whose feudal development starts from a basis corresponding to that of the Germans, yet which, determined by the historical environment, is incapable of a classical development, and resorts to an "Asiatic" aid, whereby, from a structural point of view, it produces a feudalized caricature of the Greek-Roman antique mode of production.

Roughly these are the theoretical relationships that can be outlined at the present state of research. It is hoped, however, that this train of thought has made it clear that there is still a lot to be delved into; an enormous amount of work is needed for the hypotheses to be checked by work on the concrete historical changes of form. From the viewpoint of the study of Russia nothing could be more detrimental than to repeat Plekhanov's error and to abuse the category of the Asiatic mode of production. Even Lenin was made cautious in this respect by Plekhanov's example, so cautious that sometimes even in the case of classically Asiatic systems he preferred to use the term "feudal bureaucracy" — but he was speaking about 20th century conditions, applied to which the term is appropriate.²⁷

Russia is probably one of the best examples of how warily we have to "apply" the Marxian category of the Asiatic mode of production if we do not want to use it as a substitute for concrete examination and analysis. How could we work out its "applicability"? It is sure that not by Wittfogel's sociologizing typology but by Marx's historical method, which uses concrete historical totalities and precisely for this reason ensures the relative validity of even abstract analyses. The tasks of theoretical research today take shape roughly in the following way.

It seems unquestionable that the classical period of applicability of the Asiatic mode of production is the universal historical antiquity, and its territory is the so-called ancient East: Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China. Historically, Egypt and Mesopotamia, from a typological point of view, however, China are "the most classical"; India represents a unique type even amongst the "classics". Belonging to this great ancient group — aside from minor ancient states — are those medieval or even recent social formations which, being isolated from the European development, as for example the South and Central American Indian "high cultures", do not partake of the universal historical Middle Ages. Whether the similar formations of Black Africa belong to this group or the second, the great group of the Asiatic survivals after the fall of the ancient world (by an irradiance of Egypt) happens today to be

²⁷ Cf. Lenin on China in: "Democracy and Narodism in China". In: *Collected Works*, vol. 18, p. 166.

a point of controversy. This second major group immediately divides into at least two groups: China in whole and India in part stands outside of the universal historical Middle Ages, while the medieval development of other countries is significantly influenced by the European antiquity and Western European feudalism (Byzantium, Persia, Arabs). Finally, the recent, and even more modified transformations in various parts of the world of the Asiatic mode of production; here, also we have China on the one hand, in her isolation, and on the other the empire of the Turks for example, which enters into a complex reciprocal action with European capitalism. The farther we get from the ancient world the lesser the applicability of the concept, yet in the preponderant majority of cases it does not cease to exist, it only changes. Even in the case of Russia, to mention the concept of the Asiatic mode of production was not beyond reason; in more than one Asian case its applicability is valid down to our own days, and that not only with the mediation of the "Asiatic" past but directly as well. Without the circumspect "application" of the Marxian category even in future we shall see the important peculiarities of the revolutionary actions of the East as an incomprehensible exoticism.

But the things to be researched can be formulated from another point of view as well. From a historical-theoretical point of view, for example, a detailed representation has yet to be worked out with reference to the "Greek miracle", the coming into existence in the ancient East of the foundation of the whole European development, that is, by the reciprocal action of the different varieties of the Asiatic mode of production. A tremendous — yet not easily interpretable — material stands at our disposal: the whole Memory, that is, mythology of the Greeks, which, from this point of view, is nothing but a document of the defeat of the Asiatic mode of production. In this great turning-point of world history an indubitably important role was played by the two parasitical formations of the ancient eastern Asiatic mode of production: the "military democracy" of the terrestrial nomads and pirates.²⁸ What is "nomadic feudalism", what is "patriarchal principality"? — we could continue the line of questions. Apart from the formations of survivals and modification, of a lesser or greater degree of feudalization, and later of capitalization we also have to research into the antecedents of the Asiatic mode of production: the most primitive forms of executive power, the first germs of exploitation; the "tribal states" of Africa might, for the most part, belong here. Moreover, research has to be carried out into such partial or ostensible returns of the European development towards Asia as Hellenism, the Roman Empire, or Byzantium. We have to find out to what extent the spreading of capitalism worldwide disintegrated the various forms or survivals of the traditional Asiatic mode of production, to what extent it has been and is still in the interest of capitalism to preserve and assimilate into its own mechanism as many elements as possible of the Asiatic mode of production, etc.

No single individual can research more than a fraction of the problems raised. Thus, on the one hand, it gives me great satisfaction that today again more and more Marxists are working with the Marxian concept, but on the other hand, it is disturbing that some are tempted by justifiable impatience to the path of easy, pseudo-solutions, in most of the cases to the path of sociological typologizing. This is the reason why

²⁸ Cf. F. Tökei: *Op. cit.*, pp. 24–32, 70–79.

I would like to make a radical contrast between the fashionable world of concepts and the method of Marx's historical materialism. It is worthwhile to mine over and over again even the antecedents of this method in order to get a better understanding of the method itself. And a prominent place is held amongst its antecedents by Hegel's logic and philosophy of history. Neither the *Grundrisse* nor *Capital* can be understood without Hegel. As regards the category of the Asiatic mode of production, it is perhaps a surprising contention that good old Hegel had a big part in working it out, for Hegel knew very little about the East, yet this is a truth, which anyone can ascertain by trying to compare the historico-theoretical draft of the *Grundrisse* with the main trends of the *History of Philosophy*. In the section on pre-capitalist forms, Marx distinguished three forms of production and ownership: the tribal-"Asiatic", the "antique," and the "Germanic" form. This distinction is the basis of our whole attempt at interpretation. The category of the "Asiatic" form encompasses a whole series of primitive social formations as well as the aforementioned series of Asiatic despotisms resting on the form of ownership of primitive society; the "antique" form includes the Greek-Roman antiquity, while the "Germanic form" means European feudalism. To be more precise: even in the *Grundrisse* Marx distinguished the agricultural communities constituting the starting-points and bases of three great historical forms. It is fairly evident that in the drafts of the letter to Vera Zasulich he repeated the three-phased historical typology of the *Grundrisse*, only concentrating expressly on the small basic cells, the agricultural community. The two historical typologies are entirely coincident. (The only difference in the use of terms is that it is the "new community" of the drafts, that is, the third and not the second type, that he calls "Germanic" in the *Grundrisse*.) Granted, in the drafts it is not noticeable but in the *Grundrisse* it is conspicuous that Marx wants to salvage everything that can be used from Hegel's historico-philosophical ideas. Even Marx's theory of history is the materialist "setting on its feet" of Hegel's philosophy of history; in such a way, however, that this reversal also entails a radical transformation of the Hegelian method, not to speak of one or the other of Hegel's theories. It is not our task here to show this in detail, but what is indispensable for understanding the concept of the Asiatic mode of production is that it is only in its confrontation with the antique and the Germanic form, that is, in a three-phased conception of development, that the category has any value. The "Asiatic" form "in itself", taken out from the three-phased developmental dynamics, has no sense; with such a procedure we might soon find ourselves in the shallow waters of a metaphysical sociologizing.

The understanding of the three-phased developmental conception is of fundamental importance, in my view this much and no more is Marx's "philosophy of history", by dint of which, however, a very rich theory of history can be created. What does it have to do with the developmental periodizational systems of bourgeois sociologists and historical philosophers? Nothing. For with Marxian dialectics the idea of a three-phased development establishes *not a universal* pattern compulsory for all peoples but a law of tendency which enables us to unravel "from the inside" precisely the *individual* forms of development, in order that from individual features the image of the *general* development might be formed. A detailed examination of Marx's theory of history will show that the same three-phased development that the section in *Grundrisse* on pre-capitalist forms represents with

regard to pre-capitalism can be applied to capture the subsequent development. That is how the triplicity of pre-capitalism–capitalism–communism comes into existence, whose parts are meaningful only in relation to one another, and precisely for this reason this further triplicity does not mean the thrusting of the older one upon radically different qualities but is the capturing of just the new relationship, “the logic of the peculiar object”.²⁹ By the same token — as it seemed to me to my astonishment in the example of Japan — the idea of the three-phased development is applicable and is to be applied “in reverse” as well if we want to find out the inner dynamics of the “Asiatic” form, in order to see at least a theoretical possibility of combating the “Asiatic” stagnation, that is, of the breakthrough of the Greeks. Theoretically, this selfsame pattern of development is applicable for capturing even the more rudimentary prehistorical movements; as well as for capturing all individual developments, stagnations, or retrogressions without exception, the major part of which is obviously side-tracked development or a ramification, whose possible rejoining the total development is never impossible, but is to be examined in its concrete context. It is always only in the “triple” context that the members of “triplicities” have any meaning and that is why they cannot be turned into universal patterns.

Marx’s historical materialism is a method whose application is equivalent to the concrete analysis of individual and peculiar features, revealing in the individual features the concrete generality. Marx’s method and theory of history — as against Wittfogel’s belief — therefore admits of no “sensitive issues”, does not stop short of the propounding of any individual question, but, on the contrary, these questions are the very starting-points for Marxism.

March 1970

²⁹ Cf. F. Tőkei: *A társadalmi formák elméletéhez* (On the Theory of Social Forms), Kossuth Könyvkiadó, Budapest 1968, pp. 178–188.